

# COBBLERS' KNOB

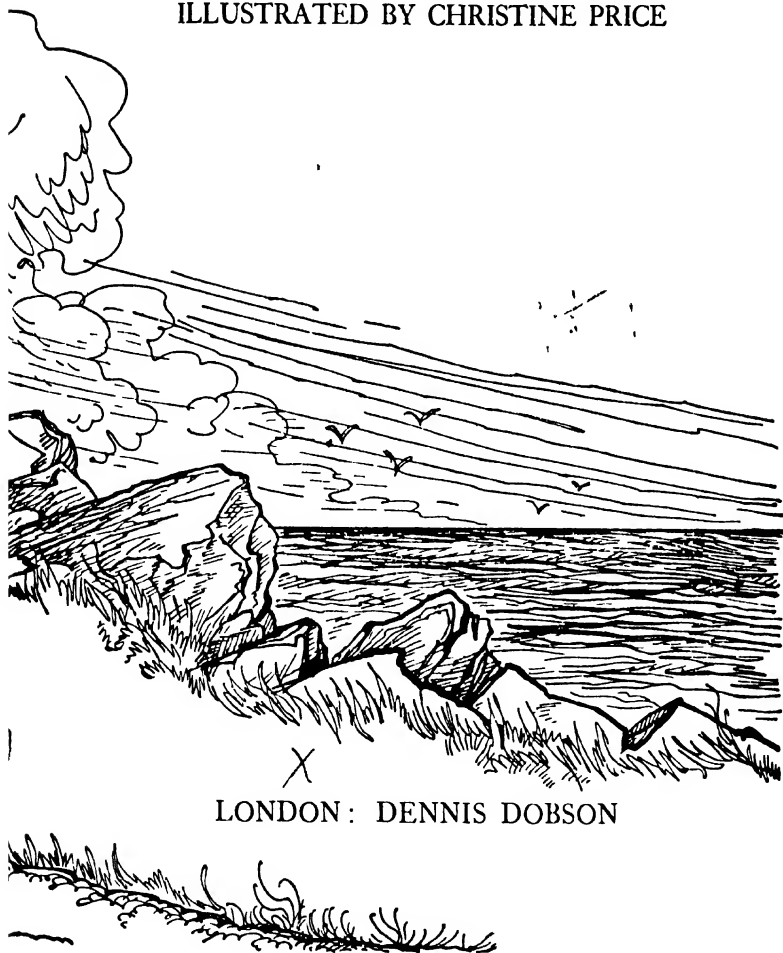




# COBBLERS' KNOB

*by Eleanore M. Jewett*

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*This book is dedicated to*  
**THE WRITERS' GROUP**  
*of*  
*Canandaigua, New York,*  
*in gratitude*  
*for their friendship and their helpful*  
*suggestions*



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## 1. *Gail Takes a Dare*

"I don't believe it! I don't believe a word of it!" Gail shut her lips in a firm, thin line.

"Maybe you don't, Gail Netherby, but you wait! Smarter people than you have had to stop acting superior about it!" Lucy Brent looked around at the others as if to gain approval. Four heads nodded.

"I'm not acting superior," Gail countered, "but it all sounds so crazy! Old Cobblers' Knob haunted! Why, everybody knows there aren't any such things as haunted houses, really, or ghosts. People who talk about them

as if they believed in them are just being cockeyed, or else they're trying to spoof us all."

"But we've seen lights in the windows ourselves," said Betty Morris, another of the gang. "Andy and I were coming back to the Point along the moor road last Saturday after supper, and as we passed the house we looked at the upstairs windows. It was real black inside, of course, and we saw a light moving about—a little glimmer that flashed and then went out—didn't we, Andy?"

The boy nodded, but before he could say anything Gail flared up. "There's nothing very haunted about that. Probably somebody was in there, exploring around or something."

"Why should anyone poke about that dingy old place?" Lucy said. "My goodness, I'd be scared to death to go in there after dark, even if I knew it wasn't haunted. I'd be afraid the floor would give way and drop me into the cellar and I'd never get out!" Her round blue eyes looked frightened at the thought.

Everybody giggled. Lucy inclined toward dumpiness in figure, and the idea of her taking a tumble always seemed to be amusing.

"Lovely thoughts you have!" said Andy. "But seriously now, there's something queer about that old dump. All the summer folks are talking about it, telling stories the villagers have told them."

"What sort of stories?" demanded Gail. "Spooky lights in the upstairs windows. What else?"

"A face!" said little Mary Hueston in an awed whisper. "Upstairs again. You can't see in downstairs because of the inside shutters. They're always closed."

"What sort of a face, and who saw it?" Gail, for some reason, did not want to be convinced.

"A scary face, all white and misty-like, that passes in front of those windows sometimes and then disappears," Mary went on, with evident relish. "We haven't seen it, but other people have."

"Who?" Gail pinned her down.

"I don't know, ask the others."

Lucy had been nodding her head vigorously. "Cap'n Tom said he'd seen it, and some of the waitresses at the hotel. They were all jittery about it."

The gang, who were gathered on the sailboat dock, shifted about a little, looking from one to another, then back at Gail, who was scowling thoughtfully and still trying not to be impressed.

They called themselves the gang for no special reason except that they had all been coming to Point Wansett (called the Point, for short) for the summer vacations for several years. They lived in cottages along the shore, except for Lucy Brent, who stayed with her parents at the big summer hotel. They had grown from babyhood

together and were firm friends. Almost everything they did or were interested in was shared among them, and they formed a tight little group, satisfied with their own affairs and not very willing to admit any newcomer to their circle.

There were two boys, Andy and Joe Prentice, brothers but not a bit alike, and four girls; Lucy Brent, Gail Netherby, Betty Morris, and little Mary Hueston, who was called teasingly the tag-ender. She was only ten but she was tolerated by the others, who were twelve and thirteen, chiefly because she was always around and always ready for anything. They swam together, picnicked, and went sailing with Captain Tom; played tennis after a fashion, croquet somewhat better; and usually had some common interest afoot. Just now it was the old deserted house on the moor road called Cobblers' Knob. It had always been there, and they had never before paid any attention to it. Now, over the winter, it had become "haunted." Gail, who had arrived at the Point later than usual this season, had just been told the circumstances.

"Why, I've known the old place all my life," she said. "It's always been just the same as it is now, only every summer it looks a little worse, with the porch sagging more and the weeds growing higher in the front yard. But haunted! Nobody ever suggested such a thing till now. Whatever started it?"



"Everything we've been telling you," said Lucy, "and besides, it's kind of suitable. You know the story of the old house—how secret, wicked things went on in it for a long time."

"Yes, and the last owner was found dead in it," Joe interrupted, "and his son disappeared and was never heard of again. It's got a perfect right to be haunted."

"Nuts!" scoffed Gail. "After it's been neglected for years somebody's ghost suddenly moves into the old place and haunts it! That's just silly and stupid."

"Well, maybe you'd just as soon go in yourself and explore around, the way you suggested somebody might be doing," said Betty, "if you think everything we've heard about it is silly and stupid."

"Sure, why not?" cried Lucy. "I dare you to go in all by yourself, Gail Netherby!"

"Dare you!" repeated some of the others. "Double-dare you!" It was plain that they were getting edgy on the subject.

Gail hesitated only a moment. "All right, I'll do it! Only—just what do you want me to look for, or find out?"

"What we'd really like to know," Andy said, "is what goes on in there. We were talking, before you came, of making a raid on the place all together. But I guess if the whole gang went crashing in, no honest-to-goodness ghost would show a sign of haunting! So if you really

want to take this dare, it might be okay. At least you could see if there's anything that looks phony about the setup."

"But you ought to go in when it's dark," interrupted Betty. "Nobody'd mind doing it in broad daylight—at least not much."

"There's a sign up that says, 'Posted. No trespassing,'" Mary Hueston added. "Nobody knows who put it there."

"Some ghost, to try to protect himself from being disturbed!" Gail snickered.

"Now, wait a minute!" protested Andy. "Let's just not be smart! Maybe there aren't any such things as ghosts—but maybe there are. I've read some darn good stories about them, anyway. Well, suppose it isn't ghosts at all but somebody trying to pull off a practical joke, or even a criminal using the old house as a hideout?"

A shiver of excitement passed through the gang at this suggestion.

"So," Andy continued, "we thought it would be sort of worth while, and a lot of fun too, if we could solve the mystery, find out what's doing in there, if anything, and—"

"And we'll keep it all a secret!" burst out Mary. "Not tell a soul what we're doing or anything, until we can publish the whole story!"

"Publish?" cried Joe. "You sound as if we were going to come out in headlines in the newspaper."

Everybody laughed. "We might, at that!" said Joe, nettled.

"Summer gang unearths mystery of haunted mansion!" declaimed Lucy dramatically. "That would make the grown-ups sit up and take notice!"

The atmosphere seemed suddenly to clear, edgy tempers smoothed themselves out, and Gail's look of stubborn resistance disappeared.

"The only thing is"—Andy took the floor again—"I'm not sure we ought to dump the whole thing in Gail's lap."

"We dared her and she took the dare!" insisted Lucy.

"Yes, but suppose there *is* something dangerous going on at Cobblers' Knob. It might be safer if we all went in together, as we planned at first."

"No," said Gail positively. "It's my dare and I'll make the first move. There probably is nothing to be afraid of anyway. Maybe I'll explore around first in the daytime, and if everything looks all right, I'll go again after dark. It's only fair I should try my hand first at the mystery, I've made such fun of the ghost part of it. Then I'll report whatever I see or find, and we can decide whether to do anything more or not."

Everybody nodded in agreement except Andy. He

was not only the oldest member of the gang, being thirteen, but he was also the most level-headed, so all eyes turned questioningly to him.

"Okay," he said at length. "I suppose it's all right. Only let us know as soon as you've been in the house, Gail, and don't go if you're really scared when the time comes."

"I won't be scared," promised Gail.

"It's time to swim, everybody," said Mary jumping up. "Beat you to the bath houses!"

With that the gang was off, streaking down the beach, and the subject of Cobblers' Knob was dropped for the time being.

Of course Mary did not arrive first. She was too small and plump to match speed with the longer-legged older ones, but she gave them a run for it.

"Seems to me," she said, panting, as she drew up beside the others, "that we might all walk past Cobblers' Knob after supper tonight and see if there are any faces or lights or anything."

"Let's!" agreed Betty at once. "After all, we don't want to send Gail into anything terrible just because we dared her."

"And it would be fun to see something spooky!" Mary giggled.

So it was agreed. After supper, when the sunset light was fading and the reflections in the harbor along the water front were deepening, they all met at Gail's house.

The dirt road running between the moors and the rocky shore was quite deserted as they started out, heading toward Cobblers' Knob. When they had got nearly opposite it, they drew aside into the bushes where no one inside the house—if there was anybody—would notice them, and watched in silence.

A dilapidated fence ran in front of the place for seventy feet or more, then, at each side of it, turned at right angles and extended back to the rocks on which the staunch little house had been built. The sea broke with a sullen pound and swish on the boulders beyond. The gang could hear it plainly but could not see the breaking surf from where they stood.

Inside the fence, in the front yard, weeds and rank grasses grew tall and thick right up to the front door. There was no sign of their having been trampled or broken down by anyone passing through them. Several of the windows had been broken. A rag had been stuffed into one such break on the second floor, as if someone had tried to keep out the wind, but it must have been there a long time, for it hung in tatters, almost falling out. At the downstairs windows there were inside blinds, the old-fashioned kind, and they were closed. No one could see through them into the house even in the daytime unless they could be pushed open. Upstairs, the windows, without curtains or shades, were wide caverns of darkness.

"Let's go nearer," said Mary, after a few moments of silent watching.

The gang slowly approached the front-yard gate. It was broken and partly open. One could easily squeeze through it, but hanging on the rotting post was the uninviting sign: POSTED. NO TRESPASSING. They all looked at it dubiously.

"Are you sure that wasn't here last summer?" Betty asked. "I don't seem to remember it."

"I'm positive." There was no doubt in Gail's voice.

"Then who put it there, and why?" asked Andy of no one in particular.

"Oh, somebody stuck it there, just for fun, probably, then forgot it," said Joe. "Nothing spooky about that!"

"Then it's all right for Gail to explore it?" Lucy said, always the conscientious and timid one.

"I don't see why not," said Andy. "An old deserted house that nobody's lived in—or been in, as far as we can tell—for ages. It probably doesn't even belong to anybody now."

"Why don't we just knock on the door?" suggested Mary.

"All right, *you* do it!" said Lucy.

Mary giggled and held back. Then suddenly she stepped away from the others. "All right! Only you all stay close while I do it."

The gate had sagged and was stuck in the ground, but

she squeezed through easily. Then she pushed her way through the weeds, climbed the few rotting steps to the front door over which the name had been painted: *Cobblers' Knob*. Much of the paint had worn off, but the letters were still plain. Mary hesitated a minute, then hammered with her fists on one of the panels.

It sounded curiously loud and hollow, that knock, and Mary, listening intently, thought she heard a pattering, scampering sound behind the closed door. Then complete silence. Uneasily she drew away.

Daylight was fading rapidly now, and behind the glass of the fan over the doorway of the house and in the blank upstairs windows there was no gleam of light. She looked from them to the shuttered downstairs ones. Suddenly she turned and raced back to the others, who were still standing outside the gate.

"What is it? What did you see?" said Lucy, noticing that the child was white and trembling.

Mary pointed with an unsteady finger to the shuttered window to the right of the door. "It moved!" she whispered. "That inside shutter started to open!"

They all stared breathlessly at it for a long moment.

"You're goofy!," said Joe. "It isn't open now, that shutter. If it moved a little it might have been the wind."

"There isn't any wind," declared Mary. "Remember how still the harbor was? And it did move! I saw it!"

Joe picked up a good-sized pebble from the road and

started to throw it, but Gail flew at him just in time to break his aim and knock the stone from his hand.

"You've no right to do that!" she cried, hot with anger.

"Gosh, why not?" Joe looked at her in surprise. "There's lots of windows broken. What's the harm of another one? I like to hear them splinter."

"Well, you can just enjoy splintering your own windows at home! This doesn't belong to you!" Gail was still seething.

"Stop scrapping, and let's go back to Gail's cottage," said Betty. "It's too dark to see anything more now, anyway."

They walked along in silence for several minutes.

"But it *did* move," said Mary again. "Somebody or something wanted to look out."

Nobody contradicted her, but at length Andy said, "Do you still want to take up that dare of yours, Gail?"

"I—I—guess so. But I'd like to make certain conditions. Listen, all of you. I'm not telling anyone just when I'm going to explore that place, and I don't want anybody watching me!"

"Why not?" Lucy sounded surprised. "I should think you'd like to have us nearby, ready to dash in and pull you out if you yelled or anything!"

Gail grinned as she answered. "Maybe I don't want any of you to see me get scared and run away! I might, you know! But anyway, promise!"



They did so and moved on again. "No, it isn't that you'd be scared and run," said Andy thoughtfully, after a pause. "Seems like you cared about the old house. Why should you, for Pete's sake?"

The two of them had dropped behind the rest. Otherwise Gail wouldn't have tried to explain, but Andy was the sort one could talk to. "You'll think I'm silly," she said. "All the others would. But I *do* care. I—sort of—love old Cobblers' Knob. It's always been there just like now—always, as far back as we've been coming to the Point. It means the Point to me—and—something more. I can't explain exactly—something solid and lasting and—kind of quiet and safe. I don't like to think of our crazy gang barging in there and maybe finding something scary—or—*dr* wrong."

Andy nodded his head as if he understood, but said nothing. The others were waiting for them to catch up at the path that led to Gail's cottage.



## 2. *The Haunted House*

Gail was not one to put things off. When there was something to be done she usually did it at once and thoroughly. Accordingly she resolved to investigate Cobblers' Knob before breakfast the next day and set her alarm for six o'clock. For a while that night she thought the matter over. There was no reason whatever to be scared of the place, she told herself. Lights and faces in the windows and a moving shutter just didn't make sense. If the old house were not so dilapidated, if it had not been so evidently unused and deserted for as far back as she could remember, she would have accepted Andy's idea that somebody might be living in it secretly. But that didn't make sense either. How could anybody live there without water or supplies or ever letting smoke show from the chimney or sometimes being seen going in and out? Of course, it was on the loneliest strip of the rock-bound shore, which made it rather possible as a hideout. Well,

she would find out in the morning whether Cobblers' Knob had any secrets to tell. She had always wanted to go inside it just to see what it was like, but somehow had never got around to it. There was probably nothing worth seeing anyway.

She woke up even before the alarm went off, dressed quickly and quietly, and tiptoed downstairs so as not to rouse her father and mother. After taking some orange juice and a few crackers, she scribbled a note saying, "Gone out to Cobblers' Knob; be back before long," and left it on the kitchen table.

The air was brisk and sparkling and the sun glittered on the little ripples in the harbor. Gail breathed in the tangy salt smell of the sea-weedy shore, for the tide was low, and swung off down the moor road feeling happy and confident.

When she reached the old house she paused at the gate and looked at it long and questioningly. Now, with the sun shining on it, there was none of that feeling of mystery and secretness that they had all sensed in the dusk of the night before. Surely there was nothing about it to alarm anyone. Gail pushed through the partly open gate and passed the "Posted" sign with only a pleasant tingle of anticipation and curiosity.

The porch flooring had partly rotted away, and she had to pick her steps carefully to the front door. She wondered, as she had often done before, how it got its

odd name—Cobblers' Knob. The latch yielded easily to her touch and she pushed the door open, then paused to listen. A smell of musty, stale air assailed her but there was no sound whatever. She stepped into the hall, leaving the door open behind her, through which a broad streak of daylight poured in. And that was good, for the hall and the two rooms opening on either side of it were dim, almost dark, in the far corners.

On account of the shutters, Gail thought. Why on earth should the shutters have been left closed? There was nothing to hide, she said to herself; or was there?

She went into the room at the right of the hall, then into the one at the left. Both were completely empty. The woodwork looked well preserved, and the fireplace in one of them had a marble mantel over it, and charred wood in it, resting on some broken andirons. Gail passed her fingers over the mantel. It was quite free from dust, and as she looked around she noticed that the floors were not dusty either. Probably the shutters kept out dirt. If she poked around in the dark corners she would doubtless come upon spider webs. She shivered slightly and went back into the hall, then on to the end of it, where she found the kitchen. Very uninteresting and unmysterious this looked, with its stained, cracked sink, its old rusty iron stove and some open shelves, empty except for a teapot with a broken spout and a few odd dishes, chipped and broken.

Gail picked these up and examined them. "That's queer," she thought. "These must have been left behind when the last owners went away ages ago, but they look as if they might have been washed yesterday."

She replaced them gently, being careful not to rattle them. There was something about the quiet of the old house that made her step softly and avoid making any noise.

Back in the front part of the hall she considered the stairs. Should she go up and explore further? Why not? The floors downstairs seemed to be in good condition—a few holes, some broken paneling but, on the whole, strong and little damaged by time and neglect. The stairs, too, were firm and sound, though they creaked noisily, and a few of the banister spindles were broken or missing. She mounted carefully.

Three doors opened off the narrow upstairs hall—to bedrooms, evidently. It took Gail only a moment to glance into them and assure herself there was nothing of interest to be seen. The two front rooms were flooded with light from the unshuttered and shadeless windows, and the back one facing the sea was shining too in the morning sunlight. Bare of furnishings, with faded wall-paper peeling off in spots, and stained ceilings, nevertheless all three rooms gave the impression of being remarkably clean.

Gail was about to go downstairs again when she

changed her mind. Stepping into the back room she stood for a few moments, gazing out of one of the windows. It gave a wonderful view: rocks and tumbling surf only a few yards from the house, and, beyond, the blue empty sea as far as the eye could reach. Gail sighed with delight and impulsively threw open the window, so that she might feel the keen salt air blowing in her face. It would not stay open, the sash apparently being broken, but she spied a stick on the floor just the right size to hold it up. The sound of the surf rushed in and the clean sea wind seemed to blow all the mustiness of the old, unused rooms away. She sniffed it happily.

Suddenly she caught her breath and wheeled around. An unmistakable sound of careful footsteps caught her ear, followed by a creak as of loose boards. It came, not from the door into the hall by which she had entered, but from the side of the room opposite it. She had noticed a closed door there when she had first looked into the room, and had decided it must be a closet. Now she kept her eyes riveted on the knob, which was turning. A louder creak followed and then the door swung open.

Gail's scream of fright turned into a nervous giggle. "My goodness!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were the ghost!"

The little figure in the doorway made no reply but went on staring out of a drawn, pale face. It was a girl, smaller than Gail, perhaps ten or eleven years old, in a

faded cotton dress; her thin, lanky legs were clad in socks and worn-down old sneakers. These details Gail took in at a glance, but it was the face that held her—a mop of black curly hair, an upturned bit of nose covered with freckles, sharp chin making an oval of the thin, delicate face, and dark eyes so large and filled with such a fire of resentment that Gail stood speechless and uncomfortable before them.

For a long moment the two stood looking at each other. Then the girl spoke in a low voice, shaken with emotion. "How *dare* you come into my house? How *dare* you? This doesn't belong to you! It's *mine*!"

Gail felt on the defensive. "Well, gracious me, I didn't know it belonged to anybody, this old house. People are saying it's haunted. I—I came in just to—to prove that it isn't and—"

The face before her grew paler, the eyes tragic. "And you're going to tell everybody about the house—and me—and then I won't have it anymore—" The girl stopped abruptly, her lips trembling, her eyes swimming with tears.

Gail's heart melted. She did not understand what it was all about, but she realized at once that here was real heart-ache. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, moving impulsively near the little girl. "I didn't mean to do any harm, truly I didn't—and—and if you care so awfully much, I'll just go out and never say I saw you here or anything."

"But they'll come in, folks will. I can't—can't feel it's *mine* anymore! I can't ever feel *safe* in it!" The big eyes overflowed, a sob shook the thin little body, and the child turned back into the room from which she had come and slammed the door behind her. Gail could hear her muffled sobbing.

What should she do? She was torn with sympathy for the girl's very real grief and with distress that she had evidently caused it. She couldn't just walk out and leave her crying her heart out. On the other hand she could not intrude more than she had already. She stood before the closed door for a long moment, undecided. Then she knocked softly. "Please," she said, "let me come in and—comfort you. Truly I am dreadfully sorry you are so unhappy! If you'll only explain a little, I'll do everything I can to set things right."

She listened without attempting to open the door. In a few moments the sobs grew quieter, and at length, after a long trembling sigh, the child said sullenly, "Come in, then."

Gail pushed the door open and paused, astonished at what she saw before her. It was a small room, with one window overlooking the sea. In it were pieces of old, worn furniture and toys, mostly broken. On the floor beneath the window lay a thin mattress covered with chintz, faded but still gay. Pictures of ships, evidently torn from advertisements and magazines, had been pasted



on the walls. A small table with one leg gone was pushed into a corner so it would stand up, and was spread with a bright red crepe-paper cover. A doll's tea set had been laid out on it. Two shabby little old chairs stood about, and an orange box made into a "dresser" by an odd assortment of cloth drapes.

The girl was lying on the mattress watching her with sad, unfriendly eyes. In her hands she clasped a rag doll, dirty and worn, but very evidently a source of comfort.

Gail's own eyes filled with tears of sympathy. "I'm so dreadfully sorry!" said she, sitting down on the edge of the mattress. "But you needn't worry, really, because I won't ever tell about all this if you don't want me to—or come here again, ever—unless"—she smiled just a little, trying to sound friendly—"unless you should specially invite me!"

There was a faint answering smile and the girl sat up, but she was not ready yet to trust Gail entirely. "What are you going to tell those people you spoke of? You said you came in to find out about the haunting." She laughed for a moment, her face lighting up. "I can tell you about the hauntings—I made them! But that's one of the things you're going to promise me never to tell *anyone*, cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die!"

For a moment Gail made no reply. Her forehead was puckered with a troubled frown.

"Well, what are you going to tell your friends about all this?" the child prodded.

"Jeepers, I don't know," said Gail. "I'll have to think of some way to satisfy them."

"And keep them away from here," added the other.

Gail groaned. "That's a tough one!" she admitted. "But I'll manage somehow! So it was really you that made lights in the windows—and the pale face?"

The girl nodded, then laughed. "It was fun, and it kept people out," she said.

"Not entirely," corrected Gail. "It brought me in!"

"You're not so bad—at least, you won't be if you keep the rest out. What's your name?"

"Abigail Netherby. Everybody calls me Gail. What's yours?"

"Nanette. I suppose you're summer folks?" She looked disapproving.

Gail laughed. "You sound as if that were something against me! S'pose we say I'm *folks*, same as you are; that's enough. And I'd like to be friends."

Nanette's face, which had been growing happier and less suspicious, hardened again. "If you keep my secret—maybe," she admitted grudgingly.

Gail picked herself up, feeling that the words were somewhat of a dismissal. "I'll keep it all right, and also keep the gang from coming in here—but how I'm going to do it I just wouldn't know!"



### 3. *Plans and Difficulties*

Gail left the house, closing the door carefully behind her. Slowly she walked through the high weeds to the gate, squeezed through it, and started down the road to her cottage. Her head was bowed in thought and her forehead puckered in perplexity. What in the world was she going to tell the gang? How could she possibly keep her promise to Nanette not to say anything about her and her use of Cobblers' Knob, and at the same time prevent them from trying to explore the place as she had done?

As she neared her cottage she heard running steps behind her and a shout—"Hi, Gail!"—and there was Andy.

"You promised you wouldn't spy on me when I went in!" she flashed at him, wheeling around.

"I *wasn't* spying on you! And how in thunder should I know you'd been in the old house, till this minute when you practically said so?"

Gail was mollified, but she realized at once that she had made things harder for herself by admitting she had been there without having given herself time to think what to say.

Andy was still looking annoyed. "I guess there's no law against my walking by Cobblers' Knob any time I want to!" he said. "I've done it every day lately—just wondering about it. I never thought you'd be keeping your date this early in the morning!" Then he grinned. "But, gosh! The old ghosts must have made you touchy! What all did you see in there? Anything queer or suspicious? Open up and tell a fella!"

Gail shook her head. She looked away from Andy. It was hard to meet his frank, curious stare and try to invent something that would not be untrue and yet would cover up the truth.

"I went all through the place," she said slowly, "upstairs as well as down. It's just an ordinary old house with two rooms and a big kitchen on the first floor, three bedrooms and—and a little bedroom or playroom or something, on the second."

"Gee! Is that all you've got to say? Just a list of rooms? What was in them? Anything queer? Anything that might suggest ghosts or phony doings?"

Gail smiled. She was gaining confidence. "There wasn't a thing that was ghostly, no chains to clank, not even a broomstick with a sheet over it! And my advice to the

gang will be to forget the whole thing and find something else to get interested in."

Andy's eyes narrowed. He looked as if he were not satisfied. "Did you go into the attic and the cellar?" he asked. "If somebody is playing tricks, trying to scare people, they wouldn't be apt to leave their stuff just lying around where anyone going in would see them."

"I never thought of that," said Gail, crestfallen.

"I guess we'd better do some more exploring. But in the rooms you did look at, wasn't there anything left about?"

"Just some old broken dishes and a few pieces of furniture—and—cobwebs, I guess. I didn't poke into any dark corners."

"And rats?" Andy added rather eagerly. "It might be fun to go in and catch some!"

"Oh, *no!*" cried Gail. "I mean—that would be horrid! And rats bite, you know! I think we should just keep right out of the old house!"

Again that faint hint of suspicion in Andy's eyes—or did she imagine it? "Just as you say," said he, "only the gang will want to know more. They're not going to be satisfied with what you've told me. So long—see you later."

They had reached the Netherby cottage by this time, and Andy departed, leaving Gail to go in to breakfast feeling rather uncomfortable. Why hadn't she explored

the house more carefully so that she could be more convincing when she said there was nothing worth seeing there? Well, she hadn't had time before Nanette appeared, and afterward she couldn't, of course. What a mess she had got herself into, somehow! She couldn't let Nanette down, and she didn't want to get in wrong with the gang by keeping something from them, even if she was able to do so.

Mother and Dad had finished their breakfast and gone off to their respective jobs, her father to his office in the city, Mother upstairs to do some cleaning. Gail wished she could talk it over with her mother but that would be breaking her promise, too. By and by, maybe she could be friends enough with Nanette to bring her to the cottage and talk freely about things.

She had scarcely finished clearing up her breakfast dishes when the gang arrived. "Come on out on the porch," she said cordially, trying desperately to think of some way to make them believe there was no reason for further interest in Cobblers' Knob. Perhaps, if she could act completely bored about it, they would be, too. But she had no chance to guide the way of their thinking.

"We've decided," said Andy almost at once, "to go back to our first idea of raiding Cobblers' Knob after dark."

"But there isn't any reason for doing that! I told you there isn't a thing worth looking at in the old place!" Gail

spoke perhaps too emphatically. "Why can't we forget about it? I'm bored with it and I should think you'd all be, too."

"Not us," said Joe. "We're out for an adventure and we mean to have one!"

"Adventure in a stuffy old house full of spiders and rats? Not likely, I'd say!"

"But Andy says you didn't explore the cellar and the attic, so you don't know for certain whether there's anything queer there or not," said Betty.

"Funny things *have* been seen and heard at Cobblers' Knob," Mary insisted. "You can't get away from that. And I'm not going to forget that moving shutter, I can tell you!"

"Well, what's the plan?" Gail thought she had better pretend to go along with them or they would be suspicious, Andy especially.

"We're going to take flashlights," Mary went on, "and go in secretly after dark. It will be lots of fun!"

"And we'll search the place from top to bottom," Andy broke in, "and if there's anything about that suggests phony doings we'll find it!"

"And if you don't, then will you be satisfied?"

"That depends," said Andy warily. "We might set a guard to watch the house until the lights or what-have-you show up, and then collect the rest of us and rush the place."

"Goodness me! I don't believe I'd dare do that!" said Lucy.

"Would *you* be afraid?" Andy asked, turning pointedly to Gail.

"N-no, I guess not." Gail was uncertain what she ought to say. "But I don't believe you'll see any such things."

"Well, anyway, all we have to decide now is what night we'll make the first raid." Andy looked around at the others.

"Let's go tomorrow night," said Joe.

"No," said Betty, "there's the Saturday night hop, you know."

"Oh, phooey! Who cares about a dance?" objected Joe.

"We do!" said the girls in unison, except for Mary Hueston.

"How about Monday night?" somebody suggested. "Sunday there's the usual picnic."

"Tennis finals at the Club that night," Gail reminded them, anxious to put the thing off as long as possible, so that she would have more time to find and warn Nanette.

"All right, Tuesday," said Joe, and Tuesday night was agreed upon.

After a little more talk the group broke up, some to play tennis, some to do errands for their families. They would all meet again on the shore later in the morning when the tide was right for swimming.



Gail, left alone, decided that the first thing she must do was get in touch with Nanette and tell her about the raid. She would write a note and slip it under the door at Cobblers' Knob. Probably Nanette went there nearly every day and she would find it. If she did not? Well, then she, Gail, would have to locate her somehow. Too bad she hadn't asked her last name. If she knew that, she could inquire at the post office, but it would be rather silly to ask where Nanette lived without being able to say Nanette who, or tell anything more about her! "Here's hoping my note gets to her," she said to herself as she ran upstairs to her room.

On a piece of note paper she wrote:

Dear Nanette:

I've done the best I could. I haven't said a word about you, of course. But the kids are bound they'll raid the house. They're all going in after dark next Tuesday evening. I'll go too and *try* to keep them out of your special room but I'm not sure I can. I thought you ought to know. You might want to move things.

If I can help any, or you want to talk to me, drop a note in our mail box. You know our cottage, "Windswept." The name's on the mail box. Or just come in and see me. I'd love you to.

Your friend  
Gail

Then she wrote on the envelope, "For Nanette—Cobblers' Knob," and hurried out with it. None of the gang

were in sight as she ran down the moor road to the old house and, after looking all around to make sure no one had followed her, she went up to the front door and knocked. No sound. She opened it and called, "Hi, Nanette! It's me! Are you there?" There was no answer, and, after listening for a moment, she felt sure the house was empty, so threw her note down in the middle of the hall floor and went out again. Surely Nanette would answer it, unless she did not go to the old place at all between now and Tuesday night.

That was Saturday. Sunday passed and Monday, with no word. On Tuesday morning Gail went again to Cobblers' Knob and after hesitating for a few moments, decided to go in. The moment she opened the front door she saw her note still lying untouched on the floor. She picked it up and was about to leave when she heard footsteps overhead.

"Nanette!" she called joyfully. "Oh Nanette, come down. I've got something important to tell you!"

In a moment the girl appeared at the head of the stairs and came slowly down. Her face was like a thunder cloud.

"You *promised* you wouldn't come here again unless I specially asked you," she said in a thin, angry voice.

"I know, but I had to get hold of you. Why didn't you answer my note?"

"What note?"

"The one I left here in the hall. Didn't you even see it?"

Gail held it out to her.

Nanette took it, opened and read it, and immediately the unfriendliness and anger vanished from her face. "That was real nice of you," she said, "to try to keep the kids out. I don't want anybody here *ever*—except maybe you."

"I know, and I did my best, but I can't stop them from coming here tonight. I think if you could hide your special things or take them away or something, so that the house will just look plain deserted, they'll be satisfied and not be interested any more."

"I've a better plan than that." A slow grin spread over Nanette's face as she spoke. "You come on in with the others when they make their raid. And don't let on for *anything* that you know more about the place than they do. Act scared like the rest of them. I'll handle them, all right!"

Gail was puzzled. What did this girl think she could do that would scare off the gang? She couldn't put on any ghost stunts when they were all in the house! "Honestly," she said, "I think it would be a lot better if you just let them come in and explore around a bit and then forget it all."

"No!" said Nanette. "They might want to come again. I'll fix them so they won't! They'll not get farther than this downstairs sitting room."

"Okay." Gail turned to go, then remembered something. "How did you happen not to see my note?" she asked.

"I didn't come in the front way. And you mustn't! If anybody saw you or me going in and out of here, that would be the end."

"How did you come in?"

Nanette's smile lighted up her thin, somber little face as if a lamp had been set burning inside her. "It's wonderful, this house is! I'll show you sometime—when you're specially invited. I like you. Maybe we can be friends, truly, when this raid business is over."

"Let's!" said Gail warmly. Then she added, "What's your last name and where do you live? I was in a dither when I wanted to warn you about the raid and didn't know how to find you."

The light died out of Nanette's face. "My last name is DuBois," she said, and her voice took on a defiant note. "I live in a foster home with some other kids who don't belong anywhere."

"Oh," said Gail. She wanted to say something warm and comforting, sensing a hurt pride in the other's tone, but no words came to her. She fidgeted a little, then, turning again to the door, added, "But you'd better tell me where—if we're going to be friends, you know, and I want to, dreadfully."

"It's Mrs. Murphy's, sixteen Myrtle Street." Nanette's

voice was softer. "But don't go out the front door now. Somebody might see you. I'll show you part of my secret way right off."

Gail followed her into the kitchen and across it to a door she had not noticed before. They went through it and found themselves in a back hall from which stairs led to the floor above. Nanette opened another door, which disclosed a narrow flight of steps leading down, presumably to the cellar.

She took a flashlight from a ledge at the side of the stairs and then went down them, Gail close behind her. At the bottom she turned on her light, and Gail looked around curiously. It was an odd-looking cellar, empty as far as she could see, and small. It did not appear to be nearly as large a space as one would expect from the size of the floor above it. Three sides were walled with stone. The other side opened out into darkness. Nanette turned to this and the two walked to the end of it, where they came to a wall again, pierced by what had evidently been a window or door. Through this they climbed and crawled on their hands and knees to a narrow opening, squeezed through, and suddenly found themselves on the rocks behind the house. Gail gasped with delight. They were close to the sea, so close that the oncoming waves pounded and broke not a half-dozen yards from their feet.

"Oh, isn't this wonderful," she cried, "having the sea

so near! Our cottage is on the harbor side, you know, and we never get the breakers. You do here all the time, see them and hear them and almost feel them, don't you?"

Nanette smiled with satisfaction. "It is nice. And I can go in and out of the house this way without anybody seeing me. Look, the rocks are high on either side of us, so we're completely hidden standing here."

"I should think in very bad storms or when the tides are extra high, the sea might wash right into your cellar," said Gail.

"It does, but it never seems to do any harm. It sounds wonderful; the waves beating on the rocks outside, so close, and a sort of queer roaring and sucking under the house."

"Have you ever been here in a storm?"

"Yes, lots of times. That's when I love it most!"

The girls climbed the rocks and began walking down the shore as close to the water as they could. It meant scrambling up over huge slippery boulders and down again, picking their way around small rocks washed round and smooth by the action of the sea, and skirting pools left by the tide. There was not much chance to talk. Finally they left the shore and went up to the road again, and Nanette paused.

"Guess I'll go back," she said. "If you come again, use this back way, but you needn't come through the crawl space. Just go by these rocks until you come to the back

door and call. My room is just above that, and I'll come down and let you in."

"It's such a queer house!" said Gail, loath to leave her new friend. "So mysterious and exciting! Why do you suppose people built it the way they did?"

"They were smugglers—at least the last people were," said Nanette impressively. "You can see how a boat could run right in between those high rocks almost to the back door without being seen from the shore. And there are other things—I'll show you sometime."

"Oh do, *soon*, please!"

"Wait till we've finished with this raid business!" Nanette was smiling and scowling at the same time. "I'm frightfully mad at them—and at the same time I think it's going to be kind of fun! Don't forget to pretend to be scared tonight, will you?"

Gail promised and they separated, she walking slowly toward her cottage and Nanette back to the old house. At least, Gail supposed she had gone back. It was remarkable the way the rocky shore hid her from view almost immediately.



## 4. *The Raid*

That night the gang gathered, according to agreement, at the hotel at the edge of the moors where Lucy Brent spent her summers. They all had flashlights, and as soon as the twilight deepened into near-darkness they set out by a short cut to the moor road and Cobblers' Knob. It was not very far, and the last colors of the sunset sky had barely faded when they reached it.

"Now," said Andy, gathering the others about him, "let's all keep quiet and watch the house from the bushes here for a few minutes. If there's no sign of life, we'll sneak up to the front door and go inside."

They backed into the underbrush beside the road. There was not a sound but the lazy pounding of the waves on the rocks behind the house. Mary Hueston giggled nervously.

"Shut up!" hissed Andy.

"I can't help it," Mary complained. "It's so spooky!"



And all of us standing here, waiting for something to happen. It's—it's sort of funny too."

"Well, keep still anyhow. You'd frighten any ghost into a duck fit, and if there are any ghosts hanging about here, we want to see them!"

"I don't know as *I* do," said Lucy.

"Well, go along home then," Joe said irritably.

"Not by myself! What do you think I am?"

"I'll think you're all a bunch of chickens if you won't keep still!" fumed Andy. "Hush up, everybody, and just watch."

They did, for several minutes. It grew noticeably darker, and Cobblers' Knob seemed to loom dimly before them as something threatening and spectral.

They began to grow restless. "All right, come on now," said Andy. "But move quietly. If there *is* anybody or anything in there we want to give them—it—the surprise of its life!"

They squeezed through the yard gate, one by one, and mounted the porch steps, which squeaked no matter how softly they trod. Andy pushed open the front door and stepped inside, the others following him.

Gail's heart was hammering so hard she was afraid someone would hear it. Where was Nanette? What would she do? What would happen if the others weren't fooled, if they found her? Somehow, although she could not have explained it even to herself, she understood

why it was so important to Nanette to have a place that nobody knew about, to call her very own. She knew how much her own room meant to her, in a home where there was always love and sympathy and caring, where, in a way, everything that belonged to her parents was hers also, in spite of the fact—

Her train of thought stopped abruptly. Andy had turned on his flashlight. The others snapped theirs on also and began moving softly about. Mary and Betty stepped into the left-hand room where the fireplace with its white marble mantelpiece stood. They were only there a minute before they burst out again.

"Andy, all of you, come in here quick! There's a funny sound!" said Mary.

They all crowded across the threshold and, hushed by a motion of Betty's, stood still, scarcely breathing.

There was just a faint tap, tapping at first, coming apparently from the middle of the fireplace. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, over and over, and then a sound as if something fairly heavy had been put down on a table. Then a light clinking sound as of small metal objects being rattled together. And again the tapping, growing louder, more distinct.

It's exactly as if a cobbler were in there mending some shoes! thought Gail.

The sounds were repeated. Then there was silence, utter and complete, except for the breathing of the as-

tonished listeners. They stood where they were, each one. Gail, who found herself next to Betty, touched her hand. It was cold and shaking.

Suddenly it began again, the rhythmic tap, tapping, this time coming apparently from the wall beside the fireplace. It grew louder and stopped a moment. Then they heard the faintest possible suggestion of a sigh and the clearing of a throat.

"The cobbler!" whimpered Mary. "Honest to goodness, it's him!" She made a quick movement toward the door, but Andy caught her and held her back. The others all stood as if frozen to the spot.

Then out of the silence came the strangest, most unearthly laughter they had ever heard. It began in the fireplace, echoed from the walls, then seemed to leap up the chimney and grow faint until it was just the whisper of a sound.

The gang did not stay to hear the end of it! They stampeded out of the house, fought to get through the half-closed gate, and rushed down the road toward Gail's cottage. None of them stopped to think about anybody else or anything until they had put a long distance between themselves and Cobblers' Knob.

Gail brought up the rear. She had hesitated for a long moment, hoping she might catch a reassuring glimpse of Nanette, but there was no sign of her, no suggestion of a living being inside the dark house after the tumult of

the fleeing footsteps of the gang had died away. She did not dare delay longer for fear of awaking suspicion in the minds of the others, and, to tell the truth, although she had been forewarned and knew that the strange sounds must have been produced by Nanette, she was nevertheless edgy—yes, and frightened. How could the girl have done it? How *could* she? Gail had dashed out of the house and after the others, shaken in spite of herself.

Then the funny side of it struck her! The gang, all six of them, going to the old haunted house to rout out the ghosts, then turning panicky and rushing off because of the tricks of a girl smaller than any of them except Mary! She began to giggle. The more she thought of it, the more ridiculous it seemed. When she had caught up with the others she was choking with uncontrollable laughter.

"Hi!" cried Andy. "Slow down, kids, Gail's got the hy-sterics!"

They stopped running and gathered around her, breathing hard, the panic in them gradually dying down.

"No use breaking our necks, anyway," said Joe, rather shame-facedly. "It's lucky for us this is a sandy road and shows white. If it had been black macadam we would have gone six different ways into the underbrush! But—gosh!"

Gosh was the word for it! In the deepening darkness they could not see one another's faces—fortunately,

perhaps. Each was feeling decidedly uncomfortable; chagrined at the swift loss of courage, bewildered at the way fear had caught at the feet of all of them and tumbled them out of the house. Above all, they were filled with astonished wonder as to who or what could have produced that tapping and that wild, unearthly laughter.

Andy turned his flashlight straight into Gail's face. "Say!" said he, "if that isn't hysterics, what on earth are you laughing about?"

Gail winced away from the light. "I don't know; it just suddenly struck me as funny, our all streaking away from the old place, like greased lightning!"

"Weren't you scared?" asked Lucy in an awed voice. "My goodness, I'm never going by Cobblers' Knob again, even in broad daylight!"

"Me neither," agreed Betty.

"I—I—guess it means there *are* ghosts," said Mary. "But, Andy, what are ghosts, really?"

"People who are dead and come back alive again, somehow. At least, that's what ghost stories are about. Only it usually ends in someone's playing a trick or something."

"Could it have been the last of the cobblers—the one that was found dead?" Mary persisted. "They were cobblers, weren't they?"

"Nobody human could have laughed like that," said Lucy with assurance. Mary's question went unanswered.

"And they came straight from the fireplace and the

wall, all those sounds did, without a soul there to make them!" said Betty.

Nobody contradicted her and they all moved slowly and thoughtfully along the road again. In a short time they came to Gail's cottage, "Windswept."

"Come on in," she invited them. "We'll get some ginger ale or something out of the refrigerator."

Gail's mother was sitting on the porch. She came forward out of the shadows. "Where in the world have you children been?" she said. "I was beginning to worry."

"We've been to Cobblers' Knob," Mary burst out. "You know people have been saying it's haunted. And oh, Mrs. Netherby, it *is* haunted, no kidding!"

"Come up on the porch and tell me all about it while Gail gets us some ginger ale and cookies. It sounds frightfully exciting!"

Gail and Andy went back to the kitchen to find drinks and cookies, so they did not hear the recital of their adventure. Andy was scowling with annoyance. "I wish Mary had kept her mouth shut," he said.

"I do, too, rather," agreed Gail, "though I suppose the story would be bound to get around sooner or later."

"I'd rather it didn't, much rather."

"But why?" questioned Gail.

"Folks will laugh at us," Andy went on. "And besides, I'm still not satisfied. I want to know what or who made those noises."

"You surely wouldn't want to go into that house again—after dark, especially?"

Andy stood still, his arms full of ginger ale and Coke bottles, and looked full into Gail's eyes. "Maybe I would. I'm not sure. But I've got to know."

"I'd drop the whole thing," said Gail with decision. "None of us knows what we're dealing with. We've had the scare of our lives, and I say we leave it at that and stop bothering."

Andy was still staring at her. "Gail," said he, "there's something darn funny about you, and I mean funny queer, not funny ha-ha. You don't want us to go into Cobblers' Knob. That's as plain as the nose on your face. Why don't you?"

Gail flushed and turned away. "I don't want you to go into that house, and that's the truth. I mean I don't want the gang to do any more exploring, I've told you that before. It's—it's—well, it *is* scary, but—I don't know—I just feel we haven't got any business in there. It isn't ours and—and we ought to stay out."

"Oh, baloney! An old deserted house half tumbled down, that doesn't belong to anybody! Why shouldn't we go into it? You know, I was even thinking we might take it over, use it for a sort of club house—"

"Oh we couldn't do that!" cried Gail.

"Why in thunder not?"

Before she could think up an answer Joe came hustling

in. "Say, what do you two think you're doing? We're all like to die of thirst and hunger on the porch and you stand like a couple of posts in the middle of the kitchen floor, with everything that's eatable and thrinkable unther your ar-rums."

Gail and Andy laughed at the attempt at Irish brogue and hurried out. For a few moments the three of them were busy handing out fizzing glasses of ginger ale or Coca-Cola to everybody on the porch.

Gail was thankful Andy hadn't pinned her down to a more definite answer to his last "why." She was also eager to know how her mother had reacted to the tale of their adventure. In a few moments the talk drifted back to it.

"But Mrs. Netherby, what could it have been that laughed like that?" asked Betty, evidently not for the first time.

"I'm sure I don't know," said the lady. "But it wasn't a ghost, you may be sure of that. It might have been a sudden gust of wind under loose shingles, or in a hollow broken place in the chimney."

"There wasn't any wind, not a scrap," broke in Mary.

"Well, how about birds in the chimney or a screech owl, or rats under the floor, or—or—goodness me, how can I tell? You were all excited and expecting something strange and frightening. Almost any sound in a



dark deserted house might have touched off your imaginations."

Everybody was shaking his or her head in violent denial of this, so Mrs. Netherby laughed and stopped.

"How about our all going in again and really trying to find out?" suggested Andy.

"Not me," said Lucy.

"Or me," added Betty and Mary.

Joe and Gail did not answer.

"I don't believe I would," said Mrs. Netherby thoughtfully. "You know without any further investigation that some very natural thing must have caused those noises. Why not leave it at that? Don't disappoint yourselves by finding out the cause, but go on pretending, at least, that the house is haunted. That would be more fun."

Gail sighed with relief. "Yes, it would be too bad to spoil a good story by finding out that it was just water dripping or loose boards in the attic or something," she said.

"Sure, let's quit the whole business. It always seemed kind of silly to me," Joe admitted.

Gail wondered. Joe had been the first to dash out of the house when that laughter fell upon them. Was he scared to go back or really bored with the project? She looked at Andy and found his eyes fastened on her.

"Maybe," said he, "and maybe not."



## 5. *R.S.V.P.*

When the girls and boys had gone, Gail turned to her mother. Her first impulse was to pour out the whole story of finding Nanette and of her immediate interest in the girl and her effort to help her keep her use of the old house a secret. But something held her back. She had always told her mother freely everything, with one exception. There was one thought that often occupied her mind, one question, one longing very deep in her heart that she had never discussed with either father or mother, fearing it would cause them pain. And somehow she felt that this matter could be shared with Nanette as with no one else she had ever known, if they could only become real friends. Perhaps that was at the bottom of her intense desire to keep Cobblers' Knob for Nanette alone, as she wanted it, and not let the others—gay, thoughtless, probably without any inner secret longing such as she had, and Nanette had—go barging into it.

She was rather quiet as she and her mother gathered up the empty glasses and bottles and cooky plate, washed them, and put them away.

"Anything troubling you, darling?" asked Mrs. Netherby gently.

"No—except that I wish the kids would leave Cobblers' Knob alone," said Gail.

"Were you frightened at what you heard there?"

"No, not really, though it was terribly spooky and queer."

"Good for you, dear! I'm sure there's nothing at all to be alarmed at, and I'd forget it!"

"What do you know about the old place, really, Mother?" Gail asked, after a few moments.

"Only what I've heard from the villagers, and they seem rather loath to talk about it. It's very old, you know—probably dates back before the Civil War. The last owners were queer folk, and the townspeople were not proud of them or fond of them. The name was Schuster, I believe. It seems they kept to themselves, made no friends, and were surly when anybody tried to be neighborly. People suspected them of dealing in dishonest practices."

"Smuggling, wasn't it?" Gail broke in.

"Yes, I believe so. Where did you hear that?"

"Oh, somebody told me. What did they smuggle?"

"Liquor, supposedly, in Prohibition days. Then either

the law caught up with them or they all died off. Nobody seems to know exactly, but the tradition is that the last member of the family was found alone, dead, in an upstairs bedroom. Or rather, not quite the last. There had been a boy who had run away. Nobody seems to have heard anything about him since."

"When was that?"

"Oh, long ago. I suppose he would be middle-aged by now. They say he was quite a small boy when he disappeared."

"Have you heard anything about the house being haunted?"

"Yes, a few rumors. I haven't paid much attention to them. Almost every long-deserted house gets such tales told about itself."

"I'm glad you advised the crowd not to go into the old place again," Gail said.

"Somebody might get a bad fall through some rotted flooring or insecure stairs. But I didn't like to sound too emphatic or they would want to go all the more. Anyway, I do think it is more fun to have a mystery to wonder about than to have it all cleared up, don't you?"

"I guess so. I'm not sure. It depends on what the clearing up turns out to be!"

Gail smiled as she kissed her mother good night, but said nothing further.

The next day at noon, when she went out to get the letters from the mailbox, she found a note addressed to herself. It was unstamped and had evidently been left there by the writer. It said:

Miss Gail Netherby  
You are invited to a tea party  
at Cobblers' Knob  
on July 8th from three to six  
R.S.V.P.  
to Miss Nanette DuBois  
Same address  
P. S. Come over the rocks to the back door.

Gail smiled with satisfaction. Good! Now she would be able to get better acquainted with Nanette and start being really friends if they both wanted it that way.

She wrote out a formal acceptance, as she had been taught to do at school, and right after lunch ran off down the moor road to deliver it. Before she came within sight of Cobblers' Knob she left the road for the rocks and scrambled along over them near the sea for the rest of the way. When she had dropped down into the little sheltered cove directly behind the old house, she noticed again how surprisingly shut off it was from any view from the road, and also how threateningly near it the big rollers washed in from the open sea.

Nanette's note had mentioned the back door, so she

did not try to climb in through the cellar window. Some broken-down steps led up to a door tightly closed. She knocked, then tried to open it, but found it locked. There was no sign of anybody about, so she slipped her note under the door and went home the same way she had come.

The date set for the tea party was the day after the next. Gail could scarcely wait for it to come, she was so eager to ask Nanette how she had produced those strange noises, and to talk to her about many things.

The gang had planned to go lobstering that afternoon. Gail refused, saying she didn't like lobstering, which was true. She had an awful moment when Lucy declared she did not want to go either and suggested that she and Gail might play tennis together instead.

"Too hot," Gail said, "and besides I've got some things I've got to get caught up on." She found Andy's eyes fastened on her curiously. "You kids who live in the hotel all summer," she continued, turning to Lucy, "don't seem to realize that people who live in their own houses have a lot of work to do."

"Well, don't overdo the hard labor," said Andy, dryly, "and be sure to show us the blisters on your palms when you get through."

Everybody laughed, but apparently they were all satisfied, and Gail saw none of them for the rest of the day.

She liked being by herself once in a while, and quite often chose to be a stay-at-home when the others were off together on some project, or just loafing around on the shore. They would have no reason to think it queer for her to refuse to go with them this time, she thought.

At quarter before three she set out. That would give her fifteen minutes to cover the distance and five minutes to be politely late. When she arrived at the cove she found the back door open and Nanette standing hospitably just inside.

"How do you do?" said Nanette, graciously holding out her hand. "I'm so glad you could come. I'm not sure about my other guests; sometimes they get here and sometimes they don't."

"*Other* guests?" said Gail, surprised.

"Make-believe," explained Nanette under her breath, and then aloud, "You never can tell at Cobblers' Knob. There's the Cobbler, of course—and often some smugglers in from the sea. And Captain Kidd and the Princess, but more often nobody except me!" She was smiling. Then she laughed outright. "You look so surprised! Don't you ever pretend?"

Gail laughed companionably. "Of course—at least, I used to, but I wasn't prepared to step right into your—into such a big party. Just be sure to introduce them to me as they come in!"

Then they both laughed again. Nanette caught Gail's hand and ran up the stairs with her. "I was just fooling, of course," she said, "only I'm here such a lot by myself, the make-believe people seem almost real. And I wanted to see how you'd take it. I love pretending! I do it all the time, and I kind of thought you were that sort, too."

"I am! I'm always making up stories to myself of—things and people, and wonderful adventures—and me in the center of everything!"

Nanette nodded understandingly. "And this old house is just the most perfect place for pretend adventures," she said. "Look out there!"

By this time they had got upstairs and into the little room that Nanette had made distinctly her own. For a few moments they stood in front of the window overlooking the sea. It was open; the pound of the breakers against the rocks sounded loud, and the tangy smell of seaweed was strong.

"Just anything could happen here," Nanette went on. "Ships from anywhere in the world, going everywhere, might sail by; wrecks on these rocks; hidden treasure in these caves; escaping exiles, real live folks, and ghosts too, and everything."

"Speaking of ghosts," said Gail, feeling rather anxious to bring the conversation down to daily life and ordinary doings. "How on earth did you make those queer sounds



when we had the raid the other day? And that weird laugh! I don't suppose you were where you could see us but you must have heard the noise! My goodness, I thought we'd tear the front door apart, all trying to get through it at once!"

Nanette giggled. "I heard you all right!"

"Where were you?"

"Down in the cellar, right by the chimney."

"But how did you do it?"

"The tapping was easy enough. There really are tap-pings sometimes. I've heard them."

"But what are they? What do they come from?"

"I don't know, really."

"Where do you hear them?"

"Mostly round the fireplace down stairs. There'll be a tap, tap, tap, tap, and then it will stop. Sometimes it will begin again and go on for ever so long, and sometimes you won't hear it for hours."

"But what can it be?" Gail insisted. "Something must make it."

Nanette shrugged her shoulders. "I guess that might be what started people saying this old place was haunted. They say it's the last of the Schusters come back again, hunting for something."

"I thought you said you did the haunting with lights and things."

"Sure I do, but I guess folks wouldn't have been so ready to be scared if they hadn't known of those tap-pings."

"When you hear them, all alone by yourself in here, aren't you afraid?"

"I used to be, sure enough, but it's nothing really, just sounds. Why should I worry about what they come from? I was scared to come in here after dark at first. I just came in the daytime, and fixed it up so I could have a place of my very own. Then, one time when things were extra bad at home, I ran away after I'd gone to bed and came down here to the Knob, with a flashlight, of course, and—" Nanette paused and for a long moment Gail wondered whether she was going on.

"And—and then what happened?" she prodded softly.

"Nothing, only it was so quiet and peaceful, all by myself, with the sea pounding, and feeling the place was mine and nobody else's, or imagining it was, anyway. After I cried all my trouble out and lay still on this divan a bit and listened to the sea, I got up and went home."

"Weren't they worried about you—the people in the house, I mean?"

"Oh no, they never knew I'd been out."

"Did you hear the tap-pings that time?"

"I was so upset I didn't notice, and afterwards I thought, well, it doesn't matter anyhow. I've been in the house lots of times at night since then, and in storms and in the

winter. Sometimes I've heard them and sometimes I haven't, but I've learned to imitate the tapping with pebbles."

"As you did last night," Gail broke in, laughing. "I could just picture an old cobbler somewhere in the walls or the chimney, tapping with his hammer, then laying it down, chinking his little tacks and then sighing. How did you dare do that? And the way you laughed!"

"That's a trick," explained Nanette. "I learned it from a clown in a circus that played here one time. Throwing your voice around—making it sound as if it came from different places,—you can make yourself do it, if you have the knack. The clown used a long name—a ventriloquist, he called himself."

"Do it for me now!" urged Gail.

Nanette partly covered her mouth with her hand. "Come, my dear, it is time we had tea!" The voice, strangely unlike Nanette's, seemed to drop from the ceiling. The illusion was so perfect Gail looked up in spite of herself, then back at Nanette, who was giggling.

"That's marvelous!" she said. "No wonder the kids were scared!"

"Are they enough scared? Will they stay away from here, do you suppose?"

"I think so," Gail answered, after a moment's hesitation. "The girls will, and I think Joe has had enough, but I'm a little worried about Andy. For some reason he seems

to have suspicions; he thinks I've got something up my sleeve that I'm not telling."

"That's bad," said Nanette. "But let's have our party, while we're thinking what to do next."

On the little three-legged table in a corner of the room she had set out two cups and saucers, chipped but shiningly clean, the teapot with a broken spout, a sugar bowl, and a saucer with two cookies on it.

"I'm afraid the tea's only lukewarm," she said, pouring it with care so that it would not drip. "Mrs. Murphy let me have some after she'd had her lunch. She's Irish, and there's always a pot of tea on the back of the stove. And she gave me a cookie—she's generous that way—and I took the other when she wasn't looking. There isn't any water here to use, and no way of heating any. I wash up with sea water."

"Who's Mrs. Murphy?" asked Gail, trying to swallow the lukewarm, bitter brew as if she liked it.

"My foster mother, as of today. I never know when the welfare dame will get a notion to move me again to another place."

"Do you like her? I mean Mrs. Murphy?"

Nanette shrugged her shoulders. "I don't hate her, and that's more than I can say for some I've had. She has one good point—she lets me alone. I can be away, sometimes all day, and she never misses me, or even asks where I've been when I get back. That's the reason I've been able to

live my own life here in Cobblers' Knob and feel that the place is my very own."

"She's never known about your coming here?"

Nanette took a large comfortable bite of cooky and sat back against the wall. The chairs were evidently for looks, not for use, as they were either too small or very unstable, so the two girls had seated themselves on the divan, as Nanette called her chintz-covered mattress.

"Nope. She doesn't bother. You see there are four little children, not old enough to go to school. She's interested in me only when she can put her finger on me long enough to make me mind them. Winter, of course, I'm at school. Summers I get out from underfoot before she has time to think she needs me. By the time I'm back, she's 'most forgotten what I look like."

It flashed upon Gail that she often chafed against her mother's constant thought and worry about her. She had to be so careful to say where she was going and when she would be back. Not that her mother ever reproached her when she was late or interfered unreasonably with any of her plans. It was just that she worried and cared. There was an unhappy undertone in Nanette's voice that made Gail suddenly feel grateful for that caring.

"Don't you—don't you like the younger children?" she asked.

"Oh, yes!" The hardness in Nanette's face softened. "I love them, and I take care of them a lot, really. They

need somebody to love them, somebody to belong to, same as I do, only they're too little to know it. But there's times when I've just got to get away from them. And I can't let myself care too much; they may be gone tomorrow." The sad, resentful undertone was back in her voice again, and there was a lump in Gail's throat, so that for a moment she could not speak. She gulped the bitter tea to the last drop, then steadied her voice as she said, "I know, I think I understand how it is."

"*You* understand? Why, you couldn't!"

"Not all of it, of course. But about not belonging—"

"Not belonging? You, with your father and mother and your lovely home—and—and everything. What do you mean?"

"They're not really my mother and father—not my very own." Gail's voice was so low Nanette leaned forward to catch the words. "You see, I'm adopted."

"But—but they love you. You belong to them just the same, don't you? Does borning make such a lot of difference?"

"No, it doesn't really," Gail hastened to add. "And they are wonderful, my father and mother. I love them both better than anybody in the world. I don't think I could belong to anybody else. But just the same, it comes over me every now and then. Who were my real parents, and why did they throw me out so that just anybody who had a kind heart and enough money to satisfy the agency

could pick me up? Borning, as you call it, having your very own mother and father, does make a difference."

Nanette's eyes were soft with sympathy and understanding. "Funny," she said at length, "I always thought if I could be adopted, all my troubles would be over and I'd be the happiest person in the world!"

Gail smiled. The tenseness of the moment was broken. "You would be terribly happy, and lucky, if anybody half as nice as my father and mother should adopt you. I didn't mean for a minute to sound ungrateful. Every night when I say my prayers I tell God how glad I am that my father and mother wanted me and looked for me and chose me. They've told me all about it. I've never talked this way to them, of course, or anybody. I just wanted you to know I understood about not belonging."

Nanette nodded. "Thank you," said she shortly. "I guess—I guess we're going to be friends, real friends. It's fate."

"Or maybe God meant it to be that way," said Gail solemnly.



## 6. *Andy Breaks In*

At that moment there came a sound from downstairs that brought the girls both to their feet. A door creaked, then slammed. They stared at each other with startled eyes, holding their breath to listen intently. Nothing followed for several minutes; then they heard a rattling and grating, as if someone were trying to pry something open.

"Somebody has got in!" hissed Nanette. "They're trying to open the inside shutters."

"I'll bet it's Andy!" breathed Gail.

They listened again. No sound whatever.

"Why don't we hear him moving about?" whispered Nanette.

"Sneakers—he always wears them."

"We've got to do something, and quick." Nanette tiptoed through the bedroom out of which her special little



room opened, and very cautiously approached the stair-well. After a glance she drew back and spoke in so low a voice that Gail, who had followed close at her heels, could scarcely make out the words. "It's a boy. It must be Andy. He has no right in here!" The girl's look was thunderous. "I'll get him out! You wait!"

Gail laid a restraining hand on her arm. "Better not try your laughing stunt again," she whispered. "If Andy's come back so soon, he has evidently made up his mind it's nothing to be afraid of and he's going to find out what makes it."

The two stood still, undecided.

"Can't we get out, the back way, without his seeing us?" asked Gail.

"Not if he goes into the cellar. And that wouldn't keep him from seeing the place."

"Would it matter so much if he didn't know it was us that were using it?" Unconsciously Gail used the word us, linking herself with Nanette. Would the girl take it amiss?

But Nanette's angry eyes softened for a moment. "I don't want him up here, I've told you—not him or anybody, except maybe you."

Faintly they heard another door opening below them. "That's the cellar," said Nanette. "He's going down there to explore, and he mustn't! I know what I'll do. Come here!" She seized Gail's hand and ran, without making a sound, back into the little room where the tea things

were spread. Picking these up, she laid them all in a clutter in a corner except the teapot, which was still filled with the remainder of the bitter tea. This she emptied through the window, then placed it on the floor with the other china.

"He mustn't know it's just been used," she explained. Then, to Gail's unspeakable astonishment, she rolled back the ragged rug, displaying a trap door with an iron ring in it.

"We'll get him upstairs and out of the way while we escape through the cellar," whispered Nanette. "Come on, hurry!"

It took only a second to pull back the trap door. Inside was a narrow flight of steps. "Get in here! Get down," Nanette ordered. And while she braced the heavy door open, Gail scrambled inside. Then she pulled the rug part way over, so it would fall in place after the trap was shut, but before she closed it she uttered a strange yodeling cry that seemed to drop from the ceiling and then spread out, filling the whole room. Even though she saw with her own eyes the thin little girl's rounded mouth making it, the sound fairly chilled Gail's heart.

"Nanette! O Nanette, that's wonderful! How can you do it?"

If there was any reply Gail did not hear it, for the trap door was pulled shut over her head with a dull thud. The two of them crouched, one above the other, on the narrow stairs in utter darkness and silence.

"Gosh! I forgot my flashlight!" Nanette exclaimed after a moment. "Too late to go back now. Just sit tight and listen. There! Hear him?"

They could make out the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs, soft and muffled, as sneakered feet would be, and hurrying; heard them drawing nearer, crossing the main bedroom into the little one, and halting over their heads.

Gail hung on to Nanette. Her heart was hammering and she scarcely dared to breathe. She was sitting uneasily on the narrow step, not knowing how far the stairs extended down. "I can't hang on here much longer," she whispered. "If I let go would I fall far?"

"No, but you'd make an awful racket, so try to stick for a few minutes, till he moves away. There! He's crossed the little room and is looking at the dishes. Hear the china clink? He's mean and nosey! I hate him!" She spoke so low that Gail could scarcely hear her, but there was no mistaking the anger in her voice.

"He really has as much right in here as we have," Gail murmured in Andy's defense. "What on earth do you suppose he's thinking?"

"I don't know and I don't care! He ought to have been scared off the premises! There, he's moving around the room a bit. He may even find the trap door. We've got to get down now. Gail, feel your way."

Gail felt, with feet and body more than with hands. Sitting on one step she let herself down to the next and

the next until she found herself on a flat floor. "Is this the end of the stairs?" she asked Nanette, who was climbing down behind her. "And where on earth are we?"

"Yes. We're in a little secret room. Isn't it exciting? The only way into it is the way we came or by a ladder from the cellar. We've got to go down that now."

She left Gail, saying, "Don't move till I get hold of you. It's tricky in the dark. I should have brought my flash."

Gail sat very still, her heart still pounding. She had forgotten about Andy and felt only an uncomfortable fear. Suppose they couldn't get out of this close little room? But of course they could! Nanette knew all about it! It was spooky and queer, but nothing to be afraid of, really. Or was there?

"Nanette!" she cried, forgetting to speak low. "Nanette! don't go where I can't get hold of you! It's so ghastly dark."

"Hush up!" warned Nanette. "Andy'll hear you!"

He must have heard, something at least, something that alarmed him. There was a sound of hurrying footsteps above them, the creaking of stair boards, then a fall, the sound of splintering wood, and a groan.

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" hissed Nanette. "That goof has gone and fallen down the stairs! Serves him right for sticking his nose where it doesn't belong!"

"But, my goodness! What shall we do? Maybe he's hurt himself and we'll have to help him!"

"Sit tight," commanded Nanette. "He won't be expect-

ing help. We can tell from the sounds whether he picks himself up and goes off, or stays here till he starves! He can, for all I care!"

Gail giggled nervously. "You sound so fierce, Nanette! But you're not, really!—Or are you?"

"Of course not, silly, only you've no idea how fierce I feel about this place! But now we've got to get out. Here, I've put my fingers on the ladder. It's steady, all right. Give me your hand and I'll lead you to it."

Gail was still sitting flat on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. In spite of expecting Nanette to grab her she cried out, startled when a hand seized one of her feet.

"Keep still!" Nanette's voice in the darkness seemed to come from all directions at once. "And now stand up—there's plenty of room—and let me lead you."

Very gingerly Gail got to her feet. Funny thing! she thought. When you can't see, you are sure you are going to bump your head into something. Nanette grasped her arm and propelled her several feet across the floor.

"Now," said she, "sit down on the floor again and feel where I put your hand."

Gail did as she was told. She felt wall right beside her, floor beneath her, and then a space where there wasn't any floor. Nanette guided her hand around a square opening.

"That's where the ladder is," she whispered. "I'm going down. It leads to the cellar. You can climb down after me or, if you'd rather, you can wait right here till I get my.

flashlight and come back for you. It won't be too easy climbing down this ladder in the dark when you've never been down it before."

"Oh dear, I don't know," Gail whispered back uneasily. "I'm afraid of falling. And what about Andy? Won't he hear us scrambling around here?"

"If he does and gets the scare of his life so that he runs out on his hands and knees, in case both legs are broken, it won't bother me a bit!" Nanette spoke grimly. "Listen! Isn't that him stirring about?"

It was, very evidently. Gail put her ear to the wall that she had felt close beside her. There were groans and a shuffling sound, then a muttered "Gosh!" How they wished they could see through the wall into the room beyond!

"What does this open into?" whispered Gail.

"It doesn't open at all. It's next to a closet off the dining room," Nanette whispered back. "And that opens into the main hall, where Andy seems to be pulling himself together after that fall. There, he's getting himself out! I wish he'd worn shoes instead of sneakers so we could tell exactly what he's about!"

There followed the creaking of a door on rusty hinges, then the thud of its closing. "He's out!" Nanette added, in more normal tones. "At least, I think he must be, but we'd better speak low till we're sure. Here, I'm going down the ladder. Do you want to climb down after me or wait till I get a light?"

"I'll wait," said Gail, "only come back as fast as you can!"

Nanette patted her arm reassuringly and Gail could hear the faint brushing of her sneakered feet against the rungs of the ladder. Then there was dead silence. After several moments she began to grow uneasy. Surely it would not take Nanette this long to find a flashlight. But maybe she had had to go back upstairs to the little room for it. If she did that she would come down through the trap door again instead of up from the cellar. Why did it take her so long? Gail felt around that square opening in the floor, leaned over it, and found the ladder. Perhaps it wouldn't be too hard to get on it even in the dark. She wished she had told Nanette she would follow her. But she would now, anyway.

The air coming up from the cellar was damp and musty. Perhaps there were rats down there! Gail shivered. She must get out of this place. She edged her way nearer the ladder, felt again the two top rungs and the way it hooked onto the floor. Very carefully she managed to step onto it; then, with greater ease, she climbed down.

There was still no light whatever, and she dared not go a step farther, not knowing what she might run into. She called softly, "Nanette!" Then louder, "Nanette!"

There was no reply, and a most unreasoning fright gripped her, making her hands shake and sweat break out on her forehead. "Stupid!" she said to herself, trying hard

to get the better of it. "There's nothing to be scared of! Nothing! Nanette must have poked around here any number of times all alone! . . . But not in the dark!"

Where could Nanette be? She waited and waited, still holding fast to the ladder, as if for security.

At long last she saw a flashlight moving in the square above her.

"Oh Nanette!" she cried, laughing and crying at the same time with relief. "Wherever have you been all this time?"

Nanette's face, oddly illumined by the flashlight she held in her hand, peered down at her.

"Don't talk so loud," she warned. "Andy may still be around!"

"How can he be? Didn't we hear the door close after him?"

"We heard a door close, but we aren't sure it was the front door and we don't know if he's gone for good."

"But he'd hurt himself!"

"Says you! Maybe he hadn't. Anyway, I'm quite sure I saw him from the upstairs window while I was hunting for my flash. He was out on the rocks and he was heading for the house again, the back of it. The door there is locked. I have the key, but he might be getting into the cellar through the crawl way this minute. So come on up, quick. We'll go through the trap door into my room and see what happens next."

Gail scrambled up the ladder again, and, now that the



flashlight illumined the little secret room, she looked around it curiously. There were shelves on three sides of it, empty. And on the fourth side, half way up, a grating letting in air, she supposed, but no light.

"Nanette," she asked, pausing, "What ever do you suppose that is for?"

"It lets in air. With that and the opening to the cellar there would be plenty. And the grating doesn't show from the outside because it's under the eaves."

"How queer! Why should they need to let air into a closet for smuggled goods?"

"Maybe it wasn't always smuggled goods," Nanette said impressively. "Sometimes it might've been smuggled folks. At least that's what Mrs. Mouse says. This house is over a hundred years old, and was probably once used in the Underground Railroad, helping runaway slaves escape, you know."

"How simply thrilling! They could be kept in there for some time, I suppose, and then smuggled out through the cellar to a boat."

"Sure thing. And that place at the foot of the ladder—I suppose you couldn't make that out in the dark—that's a room, too, but you'd never know it because from the cellar there's no break in the wall. The only way into it, or out, is by the trap door the way we came."

"Doesn't it make the shivers run up and down your spine just to think of it?" said Gail.

Nanette nodded. "I like to imagine myself back in

those days, helping some poor Negro people to escape."

By this time they had retraced their steps up through the trap door into the little room.

"Now," Nanette said, "we must peek out on all four sides of the house to see if Andy's still about. Only do it very carefully, like this." She crouched under the window sill and very cautiously raised her head just enough to peer above it. "If Andy's watching from anywhere, he mustn't catch a glimpse of us spying out."

They made a complete tour of the floor, Nanette taking the sea side and Gail the land side. There was no sign of any living being on the moors or the road or the rocks.

"He must have given up and gone home," Gail declared. "I'll find out the next time I'm with the gang just what he's been doing over here and what he thinks about it."

"Good," Nanette laughed softly. "I'd give a nickel to hear him tell about his adventure this afternoon! For a little while I guess he didn't know whether he was coming or going!"

Just to be on the safe side, the two girls stayed very quietly where they were, in the little room, for another hour. Then, feeling that if Andy had been still lurking about he would have given some sign of his presence, they went downstairs. After looking carefully all around the place, they let themselves out of the back door and separated to go home.



## 7. *Gail Meets Mrs. Mouse*

The next day Gail met Andy at the swimming beach. He limped, and declared he was not going in.

"What happened to you?" asked Gail.

"Took a nasty fall. Sprained my ankle," he declared briefly.

"Where?" Gail could not resist asking.

"Wait till I get the gang together and I'll tell you the whole thing. It'll save repeating it five times."

It was a hot morning; after a few dives, races, and general cavortings in the water, everybody lolled comfortably in the sand around Andy.

"Now look," he said, "I have something important to tell you, but I want you to keep it all under your hats till we've got to the bottom of it. I don't know what to make

of it myself, but I'm going to find out if it's the last thing I do!"

With that he launched forth into an account of how he had gone into Cobblers' Knob, pried open one of the shutters to get more light, seen nothing but an empty house and then had heard—

"Well, I just can't describe it," he said. "It sounded like a dying yodel or somebody dead already come back from the grave. It came from upstairs somewhere, and I dashed up to catch whoever or whatever it was in the act."

"Weren't you scared?" interrupted Mary.

"Not then. I thought it must be somebody playing a trick, or at least something human."

"What did you find upstairs? Go on!" prodded Lucy.

"That was when I did get scared. There was nobody upstairs, not a soul. But one little room had furniture in it, and dolls' dishes, as if some kid might have been there."

"Could any kid make a sound like what you heard?" asked Joe, who was evidently getting the tale from his brother now for the first time.

"Positively not!" declared Andy.

At this point Gail giggled nervously but managed to turn the sound into a fit of coughing.

Andy went on. "How ever the dolls' stuff and the broken furniture got there I wouldn't know. Maybe left by the last owners, but I tell you that room was full of whispers. They came from the floor and the walls, and—

gosh, it got me! I tore out and down the stairs so fast I missed the last three steps and busted into the newel post!"

Nobody laughed. They were all staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at Andy. Gail choked worse than ever. The desire to laugh was so uncontrollable that she thought she would have to run off somewhere, but she felt she must hear what Andy had to say next.

"What was it? What could it have been?" asked Lucy, at length.

"Ghosts! just what people have been saying!" put in Mary.

"Hooey!" said Andy.

"Mightn't it have been owls or bats or something in the walls or the chimney?" Joe, like his brother, was not inclined to superstitious notions.

"Owls and bats don't yodel, but then scarcely anything human would yodel like that either. I tell you I've never heard anything like it!" Andy cupped his hands around his mouth and proceeded to experiment. The sounds that he and some of the rest of gang managed to produce were not in the least like it, he declared.

"Did you hear or see anything more that was spooky?" Mary asked.

Andy shook his head. "Nothing except a few more whisperings and sort of slidy-swishy sounds. I can't describe them and they seemed to come from the floor or the walls. I suppose that might have been rats."

"What did you do then, after you'd fallen downstairs?" somebody asked.

"Hung onto my ankle till it hurt less, and then went out—or rather I started to, then closed the door and listened again. Same sounds, only louder. Then I went out and circled the place, though my ankle hurt like fury. I didn't see a sign of anybody, anywhere. Now the point is, what are we going to do about all this?"

"We?" said Lucy. "I am never going near that old place again, never."

"Me neither," said Betty and Mary together.

"Aw shucks! what's the use, anyway?" said Joe, piling sand over himself. "I'd rather spend my time fishing or just fooling around than getting myself scared in a crazy old house!"

"What about you, Gail?" Andy turned upon her a direct and questioning look.

"I—I agree with the others," she said hastily, not meeting his gaze. "Better skip the whole thing."

"Not me!" he said stubbornly.

"Oh, Andy," cried Gail. "It isn't ours! We have no right there! Why can't we forget about it?"

"You're not forgetting about it!" Andy said, narrowing his eyes shrewdly. "And neither am I."

Gail was in a fever to see Nanette again and tell her about this latest conversation. She felt sure the girl would turn up or send her a note suggesting that they meet at

Cobblers' Knob. But she neither heard nor saw a sign of her. Every day she walked past the old house, going to it by the shore way, over the rocks. The back door was always locked, and she did not feel free to go in boldly by the front door, lest Andy be spying from the bushes bordering the road.

A week passed. Surely Nanette must want to see her and hear about Andy! What could be holding her back? At last she could stand it no longer and resolved to find the house where she was staying. But she had forgotten the address. All she remembered was the name, Mrs. Murphy. The telephone directory had almost a dozen Murphys in it. She could not very well track down all of them, and besides, on second thought, she wondered whether a woman who boarded welfare children for a living would be able to afford a telephone. She asked at the post office, but neither the name Nanette DuBois nor plain Mrs. Murphy seemed to be sufficient to call forth the address. Then suddenly she remembered Nanette's having mentioned Mrs. Mouse, the librarian. Maybe she would know.

The town library was in a small, once private house located in the center of the town quite a long distance from the Point. Two more days went by before Gail could get herself taken down there in the family car. When at last she reached the place she went at once to the desk, where sat a pleasant-faced little woman with thin,

sandy hair and blue eyes and a mouth that looked ready to smile at the slightest provocation.

"Are you Mrs. Mouse?" Gail asked.

The smile came at once and with it a warm little chuckle.

"That's what the children call me," she said. "My name is really Mauze, M-a-u-z-e, but I like Mouse much better. Do you want to look at our children's books? We haven't a great many, I am sorry to say, but perhaps you will find something you would like to read. These are our special shelves for the young folks."

She moved from behind the desk as she spoke, and seemed so eager and pleasant that Gail did not feel she could disappoint her by stating at once that her errand was not for books.

In an alcove full of sunshine and shadows of leaves a few chairs had been placed near shelves sparsely filled with books. Here Mrs. Mauze turned to leave her with another friendly little smile. "We let summer people have cards just like our regulars," she said. "So when you find something you'd like, just come and tell me, and I'll make one out for you."

Gail glanced along the shelves. There were pitifully few books, most of them worn almost ragged. Too bad they didn't have more of a collection, she thought, and was about to turn away when her eye was caught by a title: *Hester and the Underground Railroad*. Maybe that



would tell about a house like Cobblers' Knob with a secret room to hide runaway slaves in. She carried it over to the desk.

"I'd like to take this out," she said, "but what I really came in for was to ask if you know where Nanette Du-Bois lives."

A quick expression of interest and delight spread like sunshine over the little librarian's face.

"Nanette!" she cried. "Do you know Nanette? She's such a dear child! And she hasn't been here to the library in more than a week. I've been troubled about her. It's most unusual, for she sometimes helps me at the desk and in finding books for people, and she is such a hungry book lover herself."

"I've just got acquainted with her, really," said Gail, "but I feel as if we'd been friends for years."

"Oh that is good! Nanette needs friends. I have thought maybe she was kept too busy with work at Mrs. Murphy's to make any."

"Mrs. Murphy's—that's the place. Where is it? Can you tell me how to get there?"

"You turn from the main street just beyond the library on to Myrtle Street and go down toward the harbor. It's quite close to the wharves, a little house just bursting with children. Not very far. It's number sixteen, I think."

Gail looked at the clock and decided she could get there and back in time to meet her mother, who had gone

on in the car to do some shopping and would be back at the library for her in an hour. She thanked Mrs. Mauze, picked up the book she wanted to take home, and hurried into the street.

The smell of drying fish filled the air as she turned from the main highway down the narrow street that led to the harbor front. Near the end of it was a plain little house with several small children playing in the front yard. The fretful wailing of a baby came through the open windows. Gail knew this must be the place before she found the number over the door; before she had rung the bell, Nanette herself, with the baby in her arms, had opened it.

"Hi," said she, none too cordially. "How ever did you find me?"

"Mrs. Mouse," said Gail. "I went to the library specially to ask. Oh, Nanette, I've got so much to tell you!"

Nanette smiled and the coldness in her manner vanished. "Was she worried about me—Mrs. Mouse, I mean?"

Gail sensed an eagerness in the question. "Yes, she was," she answered warmly. "She said so. And I was, I can tell you! Why on earth haven't you been out to the Point in all this time? If we're going to be really, truly friends, we've got to see each other every day, nearly."

"I haven't been away from this house in ten days.

They've all been sick except me, and I've had to help. Measles, I guess. Mrs. Murphy thinks so. Have you had them?" She drew back, suddenly remembering a possible need for caution.

"Oh yes, I'm not afraid of them, but it must have been dreadful for you, being cooped up here so long."

"It wasn't so bad. Mrs. Murphy needed me, and so did the children, but I missed Cobblers' Knob terribly."

"Couldn't you come now and spend the rest of the day with me? Mother said I might ask you for lunch. I told her something about you. I had to, if we're going to be friends. But I said as little as I could about the Knob."

Nanette looked at the baby thoughtfully. He was quiet at the moment, sucking his thumb and drooling on his none-too-clean romper. "He seems better," she said. "I'll ask Mrs. Murphy."

She withdrew into the house, leaving Gail on the porch. The other children crowded around her, staring curiously. They were pale, untidy little creatures, but Nanette evidently loved them.

She came out, after a few moments, without the baby and dressed in a clean cotton frock. She kissed the children all around and told them to be good till she got back and not bother Mrs. Murphy.

When they had left the house behind them and turned into Main Street it seemed to Gail as if Nanette shook

off an air of seriousness and responsibility too old for her years, and became another person. She broke into a skip and a jump and bounded up the street.

"Gosh! It's good to be away and on my own again! What's your mother like? Is she hard to get acquainted with?"

"Oh no!" Gail said, laughing. "She's more like a sister than a mother! She's so interested in kids, especially me, and she's so full of fun! You'll love her!"

Mrs. Netherby was waiting in the car when they got back to the library. Nanette wanted to run in and speak to Mrs. Mouse for a minute, so Gail and her mother waited.

"Be extra nice to her," Gail's eyes said to her mother.

Mrs. Netherby smiled understandingly. "I like her looks," she said. "We're going to be friends, too, she and I."



## 8. *Surprise Entrance*

Lunch was a pleasant meal. Gail watched with interest and delight the way in which her mother put Nanette at her ease and listened with absorbed attention as the girl talked of Cobblers' Knob. Nanette spoke more freely than Gail had yet heard her, and she, too, listened eagerly, especially when the secret room was mentioned.

"How very extraordinary! Mrs. Netherby exclaimed. "And yet I don't know that it should be, really. I suppose a number of old houses here in the North that date back to Civil War days might have been built with an idea of concealing a runaway slave. I wonder if this town was on the direct route of the famous old Underground Railroad."

"Mrs. Mouse says it was," Nanette replied, "and then, of course, that room would have been very useful in smuggling days, in case they were raided."

"How long has the house been deserted?" Mrs. Netherby asked.

"Oh, years and years. Even Mrs. Mouse doesn't know for certain how long. But she says the old folks in the village remember when the family was still living there."

"The Schusters?"

"Yes, that's the name. She says people were sort of scared of the place after the old man was found dead there. They just left the house alone. And, it's funny, but nobody seems to have known a thing about that secret room! Even Mrs. Mouse had never heard about it till I told her."

"But someone must have gone into the house some time, or the furniture and stuff would have been left about, wouldn't it?" said Gail. "The last owner couldn't have just died in an empty house."

"Probably looters went in and cleaned the place out," suggested Mrs. Netherby. "And they wouldn't have been apt to advertise the fact."

"Wasn't there anything there when you first went in?" Gail asked Nanette.

"Just the bits of broken stuff I use. I brought in the dishes and drapes and the old rag doll. I don't play with it now, of course." The girl looked a bit uncomfortable. "But I've always kept that doll since somebody gave it to me when I was very small, and—and I love it."

"If looters got in, wouldn't they have discovered the trap door and the secret room?" asked Gail.

"Of course, they might have, but they wouldn't have said anything to give themselves away," said Mrs. Netherby.

"Or maybe they never noticed." Nanette plainly hoped they had not. "There was matting all nailed down from wall to wall in that little room when I first got in and explored the place. It was filthy dirty and eaten in spots, by rats or something. After I'd decided to move in, I cleaned it all up and then I discovered the trap door."

"Goodness, how excited you must have been!" Gail was thrilled just at the thought. "Did you go down into the secret room right away?"

"Not for a while. I was a little scared," Nanette confessed. "But I saved up every cent I could make or anybody gave me until I could get a flashlight, then I explored the whole place."

"Did you put up the 'Posted. No trespassing' sign?" asked Gail.

Nanette nodded. "I found it washed on the shore. I thought it would keep folks out."

They had lingered for a long time over their lunch, and when at last they all rose from the table the girls helped Mrs. Netherby carry the dishes out to the kitchen and offered to wash up for her. But she would not hear of it.

"The afternoon goes so fast," she said. "And I know how eager you both are to go to Cobblers' Knob again."

"Can we have some provisions for a tea party?" asked Gail. "It's my turn to supply the eats, Nanette. Then let's go right over to the house and talk some more. I haven't told you yet about Andy's account of his adventure. I thought I would burst trying not to laugh!"

She got a basket as she talked; then she and her mother filled it with a generous supply of crackers, fruit, cookies, a bottle of chocolate milk, and other good things.

As they walked along the sandy moor road Gail told about Andy, ending with his stubborn intention of "getting to the bottom of things" at Cobblers' Knob.

Nanette was not as distressed as Gail thought she would be. For a moment her face was dark with resentment; then it cleared.

"We'll be in state of siege," she said. "And it will be fun! We'll work up the scariness of the old place to the limit and then—" she paused thoughtfully. "Well, if that doesn't get him, I don't know what will."

"I think it will be time then to tell him. After all, there's no need of such secrecy. And Andy could be trusted if you did want to go on making a mystery out of it." Gail was thinking what fun they could all have with the old house, but it was Nanette's right, and not hers, to make any decisions. The thought crossed her mind also that if



Nanette and the gang could be brought together it might be extremely good for both sides.

Nanette had been walking slowly, considering the matter. "No," she said at length with decision. "It will be fun to scare Andy off, but not fun to have him or anybody else in on our secret."

They left the road for the rocks and scrambled along and around them to the back door of Cobblers' Knob. The tide was running high, and there were places where they had difficulty keeping out of sight of the road and at the same time beyond the reach of the waves. Both of them were damp with spray, and their sneakered feet were wet when they reached the rear of the house.

Nanette opened the back door with an old rusty key that she had taken from her pocket.

"What's the use of keeping the back door locked when the front one isn't?" asked Gail.

"I can see from the upstairs windows anybody coming to the front door. I can't here. Somebody could sneak up from the rocks and be hidden by the porch roof, even if it is more or less bashed in, and I'd never see them. But I suppose I could hear them, probably. I don't intend to be surprised if I can help it. Besides, I like having a key."

After they had gone in they stood still for a few moments, listening. There were no sounds at all. The house had the feeling of emptiness.

Nanette nodded her head. "Nobody here," she said

with satisfaction. "It's so long since I've been in, Andy might have got around to it any number of times. Perhaps he's been and gone and decided there's nothing to get to the bottom of."

"Not Andy!" said Gail positively. "He's not one to give up. You don't know him."

They went into the front of the house, then climbed the stairs and settled themselves in the little room Nanette called hers. Everything looked undisturbed and just as it had been. After putting their refreshments on the table they opened the window onto the sea and sat down gingerly on a couple of broken chairs facing it, for the breeze was refreshing.

"You know," said Nanette, relaxed and comfortable, "I've got a problem to solve. Maybe you can help. It's about Mrs. Mouse and the library."

Gail looked at her in surprise. She had come to associate Nanette so completely with Cobblers' Knob that she found it difficult to think of her in connection with anything else. "What about them?" she said, trying to sound interested.

"There isn't any money to buy children's books," Nanette went on. "And Mrs. Mouse is really unhappy about it. I guess the board gives her very little money for anything, and I know she gets books out of her own salary for the children's shelves, but there just isn't enough."

"Well, I don't see that we can do anything." This seemed to Gail a completely grown-up problem.

"I'm not sure that I can, but whatever makes Mrs. Mouse unhappy makes me unhappy. I just love her. I was wondering if there was any way I or we or anybody could make some money."

Gail thought for a minute. "We might put on a bazaar or a bake sale. We do that for the Scouts in the winter at home."

"Ye-es," Nanette was not enthusiastic. "All the churches do that sort of thing, or a rummage sale. Everybody gets sick of them."

"How about a play? We could get the gang interested in that for a starter and—and anybody you know that might be good at acting."

Nanette sat forward, her eyes shining. "That's a wonderful idea! We might give *Midsummer Night's Dream*! Mrs. Mouse told us the story of that last winter and then I read it. The fairy scenes and the funny men—" She stopped short and held up her hand, the whole expression of her face changing. "Listen!" she hissed.

Gail heard a faint tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, then silence, then again tap, tap, tap. "Is that the tapping sound you spoke of?" she whispered.

Nanette nodded, still listening intently. "Yes. . . . No, it isn't! That's something different, and added. My

goodness! There is somebody in the secret room!"

She put her ear to the floor over the spot where the trap door was. Gail did also. For a moment they heard nothing; then the tapping began again, and a step, and a soft brushing sound as if someone were moving about slowly, close to the walls.

"It's Andy!" breathed Gail. "He must have found the way into the secret room."

Nanette cupped her hands about her mouth and, leaning close to the floor, sent forth that strange yodeling cry that seemed to fill the room, dropping from the ceiling and echoing confusingly from all four walls at once. They listened. There was absolute silence for a long moment, then a heavy step on the stairs below them. A strong hand thrust open the trap door, ripping the fragile old rug that was over it.

Nanette's gasp of astonishment was almost a sob. Gail let out a scream and then tried to choke it back with both hands over her mouth. Up through the trap door emerged, slowly and deliberately, the figure of a strange man with a flashlight in one hand and a screwdriver in the other.

He was tall and lanky and gave the impression of unfolding like a jack knife as he stepped out into the room and straightened up. His clothes were shabby, his coat frayed at the cuffs, his shirt none too clean, his shoes old

and muddy. He had no hat on and his long, sandy-colored hair fell over his forehead almost to his eyes, which were blue and at the moment looked amused and not unkindly.

"For the love of Mike!" the man said at length. "Who are you and what are you doing here, and what was that hair-raising sound you just produced or, if you didn't produce it, what did?"

Nanette swallowed two or three times before she could bring herself to answer. Gail was apparently struck completely dumb.

"That—that—was me—yodeling—and—with—ventriloquism—the way I learned it at the circus. We thought you were Andy and—and—we wanted to scare you—him—away."

"The circus?" the man caught at the word. "Do you belong to a circus, you two?" He smiled, a very friendly sort of smile that made his whole thin face look lighted and companionable. Gail let out her breath, for the first time, it seemed to her, since he had appeared. Somehow he wasn't so very frightening, after all.

"If you're circus performers," he continued, "we're kindred spirits in a way. But no?"

Nanette was shaking her head in denial. "No, oh no, we're not. We're just ordinary—just girls. I meant I learned that trick from a clown once, and it's been very useful."

"I should think it might be! It gave me a nasty turn for a minute. But who are you and how do you happen to be here?"

"I'm Nanette and this is Gail. We came here to have a tea party and—and—"

"Tea party?" the man interrupted. "Have you got any food about? I could do with some!"

So this stranger was hungry! That put an end to the fear in Gail's mind and in Nanette's too. They both hurried to the table and undid the packages of cookies and crackers, opened the chocolate milk bottle, and offered all that they had.

The tall man threw himself down on the chintz-covered mattress and accepted everything they handed to him with a smile and a "Thank you" and promptly fell to.

For several moments he ate in silence; then, with a cookie in each hand and a chipped cupful of chocolate milk beside him, he looked up and nodded to Nanette. "Go on," he said, with his mouth full. "You haven't yet satisfied my curiosity. Tell me who you belong to and how you happen to be here. Apparently you've set up house-keeping at Cobblers' Knob. How come?"

"This is Gail Netherby. She's summer folks. I don't belong to anybody," said Nanette in a hard little voice that caught at Gail's heart. "And—and I began coming in here more than a year ago and—kind of pretending it

was home, my home. And then Gail found me here one day and we got to be friends, real friends. That's all, I guess. Who are you?"

"I'm Jake Cobbler. I own this place, or should own it."

Gail's eyes were fastened on Nanette, not the speaker. Every bit of color seemed to drain out of the child's face and she looked stricken. Could the stranger guess what his few words meant to her?

For a long moment no one said anything at all. Then Nanette spoke in a voice so low it was scarcely audible.

"I—I'm sorry, Mr. Cobbler. I didn't know anybody owned the Knob—or wanted it. It's been deserted so long. I'll—move right out this minute if you want me to."

"Oh now, there's no hurry." The man was watching Nanette's sensitive face with a puzzled expression. "I'm not taking up residence here, for the present at least, and two harmless little girls—why you'd be welcome round the premises."

But Nanette was not comforted. "Oh, no. It, it wouldn't be the same, thank you just as much." With a quick motion she wiped a tear from her cheek. "It's—it's all right. I'm just so—kind of surprised and everything."

The man had not missed the tear. He got up and went to her, holding out his hand awkwardly, eager to comfort her. "You mustn't do anything in a hurry, my dear. We've just started getting acquainted, and when I've told you what brings me here after all these years, you

may find you'll be needed, you and your friend, for a very special purpose. Come, I've been eating up your tea party and you haven't touched a bite. Let's sit down again all together and I'll explain about myself."

Nanette smiled then, a weak, teary little smile, and Gail filled cups for the two of them and handed out more cookies.

"I didn't know the name of the people who once lived in Cobblers' Knob was Cobbler," she said.

"It was Schuster, which is German for cobbler. I haven't used that name since I ran away from home long ago. It seemed better then to make a clean break, and yet, somehow, I couldn't quite do it. So I compromised and called myself Jake Cobbler. And it's Jake Cobbler on the stage too, when I'm lucky enough to get myself a part."

"Tell us more about you and the house," prodded Nanette. "Why did they call it Cobblers' Knob?"

"Oh, just for fun, I guess. My great grandfather named it. I think it's rather good, don't you?"

The girls nodded. "It sounds knobbly, and it *is* a knobbly old place, full of unexpectedness," said Gail. "I like it!"





## 9. *Mr. Cobbler's Story*

Mr. Cobbler sat back against the wall. "This room," said he, "used to be mine, when I was a small boy."

"Did you love it?" interrupted Nanette. "I do! It didn't take me a minute to choose which room in this house I'd take for mine!"

"I'm glad you like it." The man turned to her with that friendly smile of his, then continued. "I liked it too, but I wasn't contented here. No use going into those far-off, sad, unhappy things in detail. I had a stepfather who was not kind to me, and I was always kept away

from other children in the village for fear I would tell the secret of this place."

"Smuggling?" said Gail.

Mr. Cobbler nodded. "I knew all about it—used to help when the dories came in around the point at midnight, filled with stuff they had no right to bring into the country."

"Did you know about the secret room, too?" asked Nanette, leaning on her hand and watching him with absorbed interest.

"Oh yes. I knew far too much for the comfort and safety of my stepfather and the men who helped him. He used to threaten me and frighten me so that I lived in continual terror, and finally, after my mother died, I ran away."

"How exciting! How old were you? Where did you go?" Nanette looked ready to try it herself if she had any encouragement.

"It wasn't really very exciting. It was just hard work. I was twelve; that's about the same age as you two, isn't it?"

"I'm twelve," said Gail. "Nanette is eleven."

"I found my way to a city, a long distance from here, and got myself odd jobs down by the docks. Then I made a discovery. The men would be very busy for a while and then hang around, idle, waiting for another ship to come in, for cargos to be passed by the officials,

or for something to turn up. I found I could keep them amused by singing popular songs or imitating somebody they knew or doing some tricks I'd picked up one summer when I'd gone to the circus—secretly, of course; my stepfather would never have allowed it.”

“Did you learn ventriloquism, too?” asked Nanette.

“No, not the way you do it!”

Nanette grinned, half-covered her mouth with her hand, and shouted, “Oh boy! that’s what it takes!” and then yodeled. You could have sworn the sounds came from the ceiling, the hall, or even the open window.

Mr. Cobbler laughed. “You’ll have to teach me how to do that! It might come in useful even now.”

“Go on with the story,” urged Gail.

“Where was I? Oh, I tried putting on a one-actor show for the stevedores and they liked it. Soon I became a favorite with them. I could collect a crowd ’most any time, and then someone would pass around a hat and I’d have a few extra pennies to spend on food. Not much, for those men all lived from hand to mouth, but it helped, and I needed every cent I could get. I was always hungry.”

He paused a moment to help himself to the last cookie and peel a banana.

“Well, to make a long story short,” he continued, “I began to get delusions of grandeur—a swelled head, in simpler language. I thought I was cut out to be a great actor, so I left my wharf friends and tried to get me a job

on the boards. It was a hard, discouraging pull, but from being page boy with two lines to say, to helper on a vaudeville magician's act, to small-part juveniles, and then on up, I finally rose to be a professional actor—of sorts.”

“My!” exclaimed Gail. “Are you an actor now? Do you really play parts on Broadway?”

“Yes to the first question. Not yet, to the second. I am an actor, but only a middling fair one, and the struggle goes on. I have a part to play. I eat enough and live fairly comfortably, if shabbily. Then the play folds up and I have nothing for so long that I think I might better stop trying to act and go back to the wharves for a job. And that's the way it is now.” He munched his cooky in silence for a few moments.

“But how did you happen to come back here?” Nanette asked.

“Oh, that is the point, and an odd one it is, too. A few days ago I met an old man who had been associated with my stepfather back in the smuggling days. I recognized him and we fell into talk. He told me he had known my stepfather well. Said he had disappeared from the house shortly after I'd left home. Afraid the law would catch up with him, I guess, but he'd kept in touch with one or two of his old associates, he, the man who was telling me this, being one. And later when my stepfather was old and ill he had said to him, ‘I'm going back to Cobblers' Knob, and listen, pal, I want you to remember this—

there's papers at home there, hidden away safely. They're no good to anybody except my stepson, deeds of property and other values, signed over to him. His mother made me do it before she died, and I somehow hadn't the heart to change it all afterwards. There isn't a chance in a thousand that he'll ever go back there, or find them if he does. But if you should happen upon him, tell him. Likely it'll be no more than an aggravation to him as long as he lives, but tell him anyhow.' "

"Why, the mean old thing!" cried Nanette indignantly. "How could he want to just dangle a fortune in front of your nose like that? He was horrid!"

"But he must have had something good in him or he wouldn't have made out those papers for his stepson in the first place, or left them for him at all." Gail always managed to find a little good in a person or situation.

"Right you are, my dear," agreed Mr. Cobbler. "And the old codger's dead and gone now, so there's no use harboring ill of him. What his friend told me was enough to bring me up here to the Knob in no time flat. I got here a week ago and laid low for a bit in a cheap lodging house down by the wharves. Luckily for me I knew fishermen's jargon and the ordinary talk of ships, so I got acquainted, got men talking. I used the name Cobbler, of course, and nobody suspected anything, not knowing German, when I began to question about this old deserted place out on the Point."

"What did they say about it?" Nanette asked eagerly.

"They said nobody'd been near it for nigh on to twenty-five or thirty years. It had an evil name, and lately folks had been suggesting it was haunted, most probably by the old smugglers themselves, come back to repent of their sins in the place where they were committed!"

Gail was grinning broadly and Nanette buried her face in her hands and shook with laughter.

"And to think it was just me!" she gasped.

"What did you do to make people think there were ghosts about?" asked Mr. Cobbler, also smiling.

"I burned red lights behind the windows, two that I'd got before Fourth of July. And I moved a Halloween mask about where it could just be seen in the upstairs front window when someone was passing."

"And, doubtless most effectively, you used that blood-curdling yodel you greeted me with!"

"Only since we've really been threatened by one of the boys," said Nanette.

"Perish the thought of invasion by boys!" said the man. "I'm so old I don't count, and I must say you've been more than gracious to me!"

"We had to be. You're the owner, aren't you?" Again a quaver in Nanette's voice.

"But there's one queer thing that we're not responsible for," Gail said after a pause. "And that's a tapping. We

thought you were it at first. I haven't heard it. Nanette, tell him."

"There's a tapping every now and then under the floor of the secret room and in the cellar near the chimney. I don't know what it is, but it sounds spooky."

Mr. Cobbler leaned forward, intensely interested.

"I think it comes when the tide is high," finished Nanette.

"It might. That may be the clue. You see, to go back to my story, I knew of the secret room in this house and faintly remember hearing something of a sliding panel. So for the last few days I've been going over the house trying to find those papers my stepfather's friend spoke of. I've been over every inch of this place, not only once but several times, and I can find absolutely nothing."

"How could a tapping sound help you any?" asked Gail.

"It just might be a hollow spot that the tide seeps into. I've got to hear that tapping and follow it up."

Nanette put her ear to the crack of the trap door for a moment. "Well, you're in luck," she said. "You can hear it right now, but not very clearly."

Mr. Cobbler threw open the trap door and all three of them stood listening. It could be plainly heard then, a sound that might be water dropping, then a slight gurgle, then silence, then the tap, tap, tapping again. Mr. Cobbler pulled his flashlight from his pocket and went down the

stairs into the secret room, the two girls following. But, as if frightened at their approach, the tapping sounds stopped completely.

They listened and, hearing nothing, climbed down the ladder into the cellar. They could hear nothing there either. Mr. Cobbler flashed his light in every nook and corner, but there was no indication anywhere of hiding place or hollow.

"I can't spend any more time on this wild goose chase," he said finally. "I've got to get back to the city. There's just a possibility of my landing a part in a summer company that's lost one of its minor actors. Now come upstairs again, you two. I've got a proposition to put before you."

To the immense surprise of the girls Mr. Cobbler stepped behind the ladder by which they had descended from the secret room and passed his hands over the wall for a moment.

"Ah!" he exclaimed at length. "I've got it! I thought I would remember." He handed his flashlight to Gail, inserted two fingers into what appeared to be knot holes in the wood of the wall, and shoved with both hands. It moved hard and reluctantly, a door which slid into the wall and gave access into the main part of the cellar.

"Well!" cried Nanette in astonishment. "I never discovered this way out!"

Mr. Cobbler took his flashlight again and started toward



the cellar stairs. "You've done quite well enough in the way of discovering," said he. "But you might have known—but no, how should you, not being acquainted with the methods of criminals? There are always two exits out of any hiding place, lest the hider be trapped."

By this time they had climbed the cellar stairs and come out in the passageway behind the kitchen.

Mr. Cobbler put out his flash. "It must be getting late," he said, "and I've got to hitch hike, which is sometimes a slow method of getting places. Now listen carefully to what I say." His eyes were fastened on Nanette but his words very evidently included Gail also. "I've been studying you two while I've been with you. I think you are trustworthy and I know you are friendly. I want you not to say anything to anybody about me and my affairs."

"We won't, of course," they both agreed.

"Then here's my proposition. I have told you what I am searching for—told you purposely because I can't stay to hunt for those papers any more. And it very probably isn't worth while anyway. But you seem to know this old house almost as well as I do, so I want you two to continue the search. Go over every possible hiding place, feel every spot that might prove to be a sliding panel, even though you are sure I've been over it already. Search and search, and if you should find anything—" he hesitated a moment.

"Yes? Yes?" breathed Nanette, full of excitement. "If we should, what shall we do?"

Mr. Cobbler fished in his pocket and drew out a stubby pencil and a scrap of paper. "Write me about it at this address."

"And," he continued, "I think you will not be sorry, though, of course, I can't promise you any special reward, because those documents may not be worth the paper they are written on."

"Oh we don't need any reward, do we, Gail?" said Nanette almost indignantly. "It will be fun! And besides, we'd be doing something for Cobblers' Knob, making things sort of right and—" she broke off. "Would you be coming back to live here and fix it up and everything?"

The man smiled and patted Nanette's shoulder in a friendly way. "Don't you worry about that, little sister," he said. "If I get hold of those papers and they are worth anything—but no, I won't go counting my chickens before they are hatched! Good-by, girls, be good to the old place, and keep on searching!"

With that he was gone—out through the kitchen to the hall; then they heard the front door creak and close and they were alone.

"And now," said Gail after a long moment, "we've got a real job on our hands!"

"We sure have! Let's begin right away!" said Nanette, moving toward the kitchen.



## 10. *The Search*

They ran upstairs. At the threshold of the little room they stopped short. Gail screamed. Nanette caught her breath and her hand flew to her mouth. There, seated comfortably on the mattress divan and grinning at them between gulps of the last of their chocolate milk, was Andy.

For a long moment nobody said anything. Andy's grin grew wider and he began to chuckle.

"Gee, but you look funny!" he said. "I'm not a ghost! I've only been hunting one! Don't act so scared and so dumb! It's just me, Andy Prentice!"

It was Gail and not Nanette who burst out indignantly. "And you ought to be ashamed of yourself, following and spying on us girls! This place belongs to Nanette, at least it practically does, and you'd better get yourself right out and leave us alone!"

Andy rose to his feet and bowed mockingly. "Pleased

to meet you, Nanette. And, Miss Netherby, I will gladly oblige! Now that I've solved the mystery of Cobblers' Knob, I'll take myself off the premises, but only on one condition."

He tried to look sober and a little fierce but did not succeed very well. Nanette still said nothing, but stared at him with big puzzled eyes. It must have seemed to her as if the bottom of everything had suddenly dropped out, leaving her with nothing to stand on. First Mr. Cobbler and now—

Gail was giggling at Andy's funny expression. "What's your one condition?" said she.

"That I be taught that wonderful, terrible, magnificent yodeling that sure raises the hair off your head! Gosh, if I could learn to do that I'd be happy, healthy, wealthy, and famous for the rest of my life!"

Nanette laughed too, then, and the tension was suddenly broken.

"Sure, I'll teach you how to do it!" said she. "That is, if I can. It took me an awful long time to learn, myself."

"Well, then, perhaps I can be an awful long time leaving the premises! I like it here fine!" He reseated himself and waved the girls toward chairs quite as if he were the owner of the place and they his guests. "Besides," he continued, "there are a lot of things about this joint I want to know. That trap door and hidden room, for instance. And who was the long, lanky guy you were poking around

with? Golly! I had the worst time keeping my eye on you and staying out of sight of the three of you at the same time! What's it all about, anyway?"

"How long have you been in here?" Gail ignored his questions, substituting one of her own, a very important one for her peace of mind and Nanette's if they were to keep Mr. Cobbler and his affairs a secret.

"You mean this time? I've practically lived here for the past two weeks, trying to find out what was so spooky about it. Today I'd been the rounds as usual when I suddenly discovered you two were upstairs here, and I had to make myself scarce. I stayed out of sight, mostly in the cellar, then I began to hear things, a tapping on the wall somewhere, and then somebody let out that ghastly yodel. I dashed upstairs then to see if anyone was being murdered or whether it was one of you that was doing it."

"Very brave and noble of you, I'm sure," commented Gail with a snicker, "but go on."

Andy ignored the interruption. "You never noticed me," he said, "even when I practically fell in upon you, you were so taken up with that tall, thin fellow coming up out of a hole in the floor. I figured by then I'd had an eye full as well as an ear full and had best retreat, for the time being, anyway."

"Was that the first you knew about the secret room?" Nanette asked.

"Sure thing! And you could have knocked me over

with a baby's rattle! I beat it to the hall downstairs until everything was quiet again, then I sneaked up and found you'd all gone down through the trap door and left it open. Honestly, at that point I resisted the temptation of my life!" Andy waved his hands dramatically toward the spot in the rug that covered the trap door. "I wanted to clap it shut and have the three of you caged down there and at my mercy!"

"Oh, but we wouldn't have been!" laughed Gail. "There's a way out, two ways. We took one of them. But go on, what did you do next?"

"Jumped about like a cat on fly paper, trying to keep out of your sight and find out what you were doing. We won't go into all the undignified details. I did everything except crawl across the ceiling over your heads. Why you didn't see me or hear me, I don't know. And what you were doing, the three of you, prowling around in the cellar, I can't imagine. I overheard just enough when you were talking in that place behind the kitchen to make me just about die with curiosity. Now, open up, spill the beans, so I won't pass out entirely!"

Gail and Nanette looked at each other, puzzled and dismayed. What were they to say? What could they do?

"I guess we'll just have to tell him the rest," said Nanette at last, "he's found out so much. It's more dangerous

to have him know a little and tell it round than know the whole thing and keep his mouth shut. He can keep a secret, can't he?"

"Yes, he can keep a secret, I'll say that for him."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Andy. "And now, for Pete's sake, get going!"

"It's really breaking our promise to Mr. Cobbler," Gail said, "but we can't help what you know already."

"Mr. Cobbler of Cobblers' Knob!" broke in Andy, the irrepressible. "Gee! this gets more like a story book every minute. Now, start at the beginning and I won't interrupt again, honest I won't!"

By the time the girls had recounted their afternoon's experience with Mr. Cobbler and had gone back briefly over the history of the house and Nanette's use of it as a place of her own, Andy's interest had increased enormously. He offered eagerly to help them in their search for the missing papers. He made all sorts of extravagant and violent declarations as to what he would wish to befall him if he so much as breathed a word of the matter to anyone.

Nanette's attitude rather puzzled Gail. She seemed subdued, quiet, more ready than Gail herself to accept Andy's help. What had happened to her fierce desire to keep Cobblers' Knob and all about it secret and her own alone? Had the sudden surprising developments of the

day completely broken her sense of possession, of ownership, of the old house? What was going on in the girl's mind? Gail's heart ached for her, yet she did not know quite how to approach her.

Finally, long past their supper hour, the three agreed to meet the next morning and begin a careful search for the papers Mr. Cobbler was so anxious to find. Then they went out through the front door, forgetting any need for secrecy, if there were one, now that Andy had come crashing in. He left them almost at once, turning into the road that led to his cottage. Gail and Nanette walked along together a little farther before they separated.

"I think you're an awfully good sport," said Gail heartily, "to take all this so well—this sort of breaking down of your feeling about Cobblers' Knob."

Nanette's eyes filled with sudden tears, and it was several moments before she could answer. "Oh Gail, I'm not really a good sport at all! I feel perfectly terrible. I won't be able to think of the Knob as mine any more, ever. I can't even make-believe about it! But I suppose something like this was bound to happen sometime. I like Mr. Cobbler, and that makes it a little easier. It would be too awful if somebody I just hated turned out to be the owner, when I love it so much."

"And as for Andy"—Gail slipped her arm around Nanette's waist as they walked along—"I know you can trust him to keep any secret, and if things go back to



where they were before, he'll stay out of Cobblers' Knob and not bother us. He's a nice kid, not nearly so much of a nuisance as most boys."

Nanette managed a weak little smile. "Anyway," she said tremulously, "I've got you for a friend, haven't I? And you're very—comfortable."

The search began in earnest the next morning. They gave the day to it, Gail bringing a sandwich-and-chocolate-milk lunch for the three of them so they would not have to be interrupted to go home.

It did not take them very long to go over every inch of the old house. Cupboards and closets were all open and bare. The attic seemed empty, but they pried under eaves and in dark corners to make sure. The roof evidently leaked, for there were several damp, discolored spots on the floor, and holes in the roof rotted right through in places.

"I'd better get busy and patch those up," said Nanette, and added, "at least, if I can go on living here I will."

"I'll help you," said Andy at once. "And I guess you can feel easy about keeping possession. An old actor without a cent isn't very likely to take on a deserted house that would need a big pile of money poured into it before it was livable."

"It's quite livable and just as I like it now!" said Nanette loftily.

Andy did not laugh at her as Gail was afraid he would.

He came out of the corner he had been investigating, cobwebs in his hair and his hands grimy with dirt.

"Do you know," he said, soberly, "an idea has just struck me. Suppose we do find these papers of Mr. Cobbler's and they mean money to him. They might, of course. Then there would be danger of his taking over the old place and making it okay and living in it."

"What a horrid thought!" said Gail, brushing her hands together to get the dust off them.

"We could stop now. We don't have to try to find them." Andy looked at Nanette as he spoke.

For just a little moment she hesitated. "Oh, no, we'll go on searching till we're sure there's nothing here to find. I wouldn't feel right about it if we didn't. Mr. Cobbler sort of trusted the matter to Gail and me. Only, now I almost hope we don't find any papers."

"Then we go on?" said Andy. "Of course we may never find a thing, and if we do, it may not make any difference to the house."

When they had satisfied themselves there was no nook or cranny in the attic they had left unexplored, they went down into the secret room.

"Of course, this is the most natural place to look," Andy remarked as, with flashlights in hand, the three descended through the trap door, "but you said Mr. Cobbler had already made a thorough job of it here, didn't you?"

The girls nodded. "He seemed to be quite sure there was a sliding panel or something somewhere with a space behind it to hide things in," said Nanette.

"Then we'll tap every inch of it to see if any place sounds hollow," said Andy.

"He must have done that himself," said Gail, "but he might have missed the spot."

"You'd naturally think there'd be a place like that," Nanette added, "a hole where the smugglers would hide their gold. I've often imagined them coming up around the point in a dory, with muffled oars, and no light but the light of stars."

"Gee, you sound like a mystery book! Suppose we find a bag of gold hidden behind the sliding panel, who'd it belong to, anyway?" Andy asked.

"Mr. Cobbler, of course," said Nanette.

"But if it was gotten illegally, against the law, wouldn't it belong to the government?" Gail wondered.

"We'd better find it before we get into an argument as to who owns it." Andy climbed up the steep stairs again and handed down the least rickety of the chairs so one of them could stand on it and reach the top of the little room.

"Right you are!" Gail agreed.

"Only it's lots more fun to be hunting for hidden gold, just a little gold, not too much, than for papers, especially if—" Nanette left her sentence unfinished, but the other two knew what she was thinking.

They made a careful job of it. Andy, standing on the very unsteady chair, took the upper part of the walls, tapping every inch of their surface. The others did the same with the space lower down. One side sounded different from the others, though not exactly hollow.

"This is the one that backs against the dining room closet," said Nanette. "There probably wouldn't be any space between to hide things."

"Don't be so sure," said Andy, tapping vigorously. The other two being occupied at the moment with the opposite wall, he continued down to the bottom. Suddenly he let out a yell that startled them.

"I bet I've found it!" he cried excitedly. "Listen to this, you two!"

Tapping with his fingers he went over the surface of the wall all around the spot he had indicated, and then beat vigorously on that. It sounded definitely hollow.

Breathless with excitement, all three tried to find some sign of an opening, but no crack in the solid wall space was visible.

"We'll have to break through," Andy said at length.

"Better not—not yet, at least," Nanette objected. "We've no right to damage Mr. Cobbler's house."

"Well, he told you to find his papers, didn't he?" Andy had already reached for the hammer he had brought into the secret room with him.

"There must be some regular way in, if that is a hiding place," Nanette said. "Mightn't this just be a hollow space where the beams had rotted away or something?"

"That's true." Andy threw down his hammer. "What did you say this wall backed against?"

"The cupboard off the dining room, I'm quite sure," said Nanette.

"Suppose I go up there and thump against the wall," Gail suggested. "Then you'll know exactly where it is."

"I don't see how that would help any," objected Andy, "but go ahead. We mustn't leave a stone unturned, or rather a wall untapped!"

Gail departed, and in a few moments the other two heard her knuckles knocking right above their heads.

"You're too high, tap lower," called Andy.

Gail's muffled voice came back. "I am? Hear me now?" And, "Oh, my goodness, this sounds different! Better come up here, quick!"

They rushed up the narrow stairway, through the trap door and then down the front stairs to what Nanette had called the dining room. Between that and the kitchen they found Gail on her knees in the closet, feeling with her fingers along an almost invisible crack.

"Jumping Jiminy, you've found it!" cried Andy, pushing her away.

His hands traced the crack and then he began to shove

gently. A panel in the wall suddenly gave and slid in, and there before their eyes stood revealed what looked to be a small cupboard.

"But it's empty!" cried Gail.

"Of course, because it's got no bottom!" Andy was frantically feeling where the floor of the hidden compartment should be. "Here, give me a flash!"

"We left them all in the secret room," said Nanette. "Let me look, and feel! You go get one!"

Andy dashed away. Nanette took his place. "I'll bet this goes down into the cellar! It smells musty—no, not musty, just damp and salt. Smell it, Gail."

And Gail, who was close beside her, nodded vigorously. "But why should a secret hiding place have no bottom—no floor to put things on?" she questioned. "It just doesn't make sense!"

They could hear Andy plunging down the stairs into the secret room and then up again. In a moment he appeared with two flashlights. "Here, now we can see what we are doing," he said.

Nanette and Gail made room for him, then crowded close as he turned a flashlight into the little hidden place in the wall. If there ever had been a bottom to it, there was none now. Instead of a cupboard it was apparently a shaft leading down into the cellar.

"Perhaps the smugglers used it when they had to get rid of things in a hurry," suggested Gail.

"You mean they'd just chuck things in here and let them fall into the cellar?" said Andy. "That wouldn't be very safe if it was bottles, but come on, let's see! Nanette and I will go down cellar with one flashlight and you stay here with the other. Then we can make connections."

Gail, waiting, tense and excited, thought she would never hear from the other two. As a matter of fact they moved fast. Nanette led Andy directly to the secret door that led out from the small room in the cellar, being sure the drop shaft, as she called it, would open there into the crawl space. After scrambling about the rough, uneven flooring they found the spot of light made by Gail's flashlight.

"It's all washed out and queer down here," Andy called up.

"Must be the tide's got in," added Nanette. "But I didn't know the sea water had ever been quite this close to the house—really under it!"

"Well, anyway, there's no hidden cache of papers here, or bags of moldy gold," said Andy. "Nothing, nothing at all but broken cement and stones and holes, and a bit of seaweed here and there. We might as well call it a day and go home."

He and Nanette rejoined Gail in the hall.

"Cobblers' Knob seems to me nothing but a fraud," commented Andy disgustedly, "a trap door to a secret

room with another secret room under it and a very secret shaft, all leading nowhere in particular and getting us nowhere fast. I'm about fed up with the old dump!"

But Nanette's cheeks were flushed and her eyes were shining. "Oh, no!" she said, "Cobblers' Knob isn't a fraud at all! It's just keeping its own secrets—even from me!"

"Do you really want to know them?" asked Gail, wondering.

"I'm—I'm not sure. But we've found out that there's no place at all where papers might have been hidden away, haven't we?"

"No place whatever," Andy assured her, positively. "About that there isn't a question."

Nanette sighed, though whether with disappointment or satisfaction Gail could not feel quite sure.

"And now," Andy continued, "when do I get my first lesson in yodeling and—what do you call it?—in—in ventriloquism?"

"Tomorrow," said Nanette promptly.

"How about meeting at Windswept for it?" Gail suggested.

"Righto! At Gail's cottage tomorrow morning," agreed Andy. "What time?"

"Nine," said Nanette. "No, ten, I've got some work to do at the house, first, and it's quite a walk out here. And I've got to have a conference with Mrs. Mouse on my way."





## I I. *The Play's the Thing*

In time Andy learned to yodel somewhat as Nanette did, and to drop his voice from the ceiling or make it sound as if it were coming from under his feet or around the corner, with the art of a ventriloquist. Nanette was a faithful teacher and the boy, with much practice, somewhat bettered the instruction, as everyone on the Point could, and did, indignantly testify. But that had nothing to do with the history of Cobblers' Knob, while the play did, though indirectly.

The morning after their search for the papers, Nanette was late for the promised meeting at Gail's cottage. When

she did arrive she came on the run and bubbling with enthusiasm.

"Mrs. Mouse thinks it's fine and she'll direct it and maybe we'll make lots and lots of money for children's books! It's our very own project!"

"What is?" cried Andy blankly.

"What are you talking about?" said Gail, completely mystified.

"Why, the play, of course! Don't you remember our planning about it? You suggested it yourself, Gail—having a bunch of us give a play for the benefit of the children's room in our library. And I said we could do *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—part of it, at least."

"Why, so I did! I'd forgotten all about it. Andy, it would be fun! Have all the gang in it, and maybe we could give it in Mrs. Whipple's back yard. It would be wonderful to have the fairies flitting in and out of those flower beds, with the bushes and trees for a background!"

But Andy was not in the least impressed. "Aw, skip it!" he said. "Who wants to act in a play? That's girls' and kids' stuff!"

"Well, you won't have to if you don't want to!" But Gail sounded a bit deflated.

"You could be the business manager and take care of the tickets and everything," suggested Nanette.

Andy showed a spark of interest. "Could be. But what's this *Midnight Summer's Dream*? It sounds balmy to me."

"It's called *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and it's by

Shakespeare," said Gail severely. "You should know that! And I saw it in the movies ages ago and loved it. But I don't really see how we could do anything so difficult. There's so much magical stuff in it." She turned to Nanette.

"We couldn't do it like the movie, of course, but Mrs. Mouse says we can give the fairy and the funny-men scenes very well, and people will like it."

"Mrs. Mouse, Mrs. Mouse, who in thunder is Mrs. Mouse? Is she afraid of cats?"

"Of course not!" said Nanette seriously, having missed Andy's rather feeble joke entirely. "She's our librarian, and she's simply wonderful!"

And from then on Mrs. Mouse took over the whole plan, although, by some quiet magic, she made it seem to be entirely in the hands of the boys and girls.

Things began at once to move fast. Gail told the gang and a number of other summer cottagers. Lucy Brent told the hotel people and corralled several teen-agers as possible actors. Nanette rounded up some of the villagers and they all met one morning a few days later in the library to talk the matter over with Mrs. Mouse.

Gail noticed with interest how all the children warmed to her. They came into the library mildly taken with the idea of giving a play but mostly concerned with their own affairs. The summer people collected themselves in one group and the villagers in another. It looked as if nothing short of a miracle would ever get them together.

Then Mrs. Mouse gathered them around her and began to talk. She was quiet, but alive with enthusiasm, and gave forth such a warm sense of friendliness and caring that even those who had never known her felt at ease with her at once and open to any suggestion she might make. She told them the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and they listened intently. When she had finished, a little sigh of satisfaction ran around the room.

"Gee, that's good," said one of the village boys.

"Specially the donkey part! Eee-aw! Eee-aw!" said Joe, with his hands flapping by his ears and such a comical imitation of an ass's bray that everyone laughed.

"How can we decide about parts?" said Mary Hueston. "I wish I could be Puck, or one of the fairies!"

Mrs. Mouse had already mimeographed parts for the try-outs. These she handed out to any who wanted them. A committee was appointed to choose with her which person should have which part, and a day was set to hear everybody and make the decision.

In no time at all, rehearsals had begun and all the necessary work and arrangements had been set in motion. Mrs. Whipple consented to lend her back lawn and garden for the occasion and a group of mothers promised to undertake the important matter of costuming the players.

Mrs. Netherby expressed surprise at the way the idea caught the fancy of the summer people. "It's quite astonishing," she said to Gail, "how everybody is taking this thing up. It seems almost as if they had been waiting for

something to happen that they could really be enthusiastic about—something worth while. I have an idea you boys and girls will make the hit of the season.”

The cast settled down to work in earnest. Rehearsals were set for every morning and often in the afternoon or evening for some special scenes that needed extra coaching. Mrs. Mouse got a substitute to do her work in the library and devoted herself to the play.

Nanette had shown surprising ability at the try-outs and had been unanimously chosen for the part of Puck. Joe Prentice, with his natural tendency to clown, became Nick Bottom, and little Mary Hueston was made happy with the part of Peaseblossom, chief of the fairies. The part of Queen Titania was given to a tall, lovely-looking girl from the hotel and the other speaking parts went to village boys and girls. There was no ill feeling in anyone's mind, apparently. The rest of the gang seemed to be contented either to be attendants or “supers” or to undertake the less glamorous work of attending to the programs, seats, scenery, and so forth. Andy, in the roll of business manager, showed himself both smart and tireless. Gail was made property mistress but her work would not begin till nearer the time for the production.

Meanwhile, she watched the rehearsals with keen interest and made herself useful in any little way that turned up.

Perhaps the most surprising thing to Gail was the apparent change in Nanette. She no longer seemed solitary,

remote, almost resentful toward people. She was gay, electric, full of grace and fun, almost impish at times. "I'm Puck," she said on one occasion, "not just in the play but all the time! I think him, pretend him; I *am* Puck!" No wonder she played her part so perfectly!

"You know," Gail said to her one day when they were walking back to Windswept together after a particularly successful rehearsal in Mrs. Whipple's garden, "you know, I think it's just the nicest thing, the way everybody is working together. We never paid much attention to the village people before or they to us. Now we're all having such a good time, and it's all going so smoothly."

Nanette's happy face clouded for a moment. "It won't last," said she pessimistically. "When I get through thinking I'm Puck I won't feel gay and folksy any more."

"You might! Everybody's so friendly. Don't you think they'll go on being that way?"

"Not if they're just acting a part, like me."

"Don't you feel friendly toward all of them?"

"Ye-es, but—I'm afraid to let go of myself. I might have to move away."

"But there'd be other friendly people in other places. There always are."

Nanette smiled warmly. "I guess there always are for you." They walked along for some moments in silence. "I wonder lots of times," Nanette said slowly, almost as if she were thinking aloud, "what sort of people my father and mother were, don't you?"

"Once in a while," Gail admitted, hesitating.

"Wouldn't you give anything to know?"

"I—I'm not sure. It—just doesn't seem quite fair to my mother and father, I mean the ones I belong to now, to think much about it. And anyway, if I really could know my—my real father and mother, I'd probably not like them nearly as much."

"That's so," agreed Nanette. "I'd probably feel like that too, if I really belonged, but now I think about it lots. Maybe they were actors. I'm pretending that now and it makes me do Puck better. Maybe they were rich or famous or wonderful in some way."

"Then they wouldn't have given you up, if they could have kept you, would they?"

"No, I guess they wouldn't." She seemed crestfallen for a moment, then she brightened. "I'll have to invent some reason why it had to be like this, then it won't spoil the pretending, anyway."

They had reached Gail's cottage by this time. Mrs. Netherby was on the porch and, as usual, asked Nanette to come in and stay for lunch, but after a moment's hesitation Nanette refused.

"Oh, do come in!" Gail intreated. "We don't have half chances enough to visit now that the play is on!"

"I can't. I've got to help Mrs. Murphy this afternoon. She's not a bit happy about our play; says she never gets any good out of me any more."

"But the play is going well?" asked Mrs. Netherby.

"Wonderfully!" cried Gail enthusiastically. "Everybody knows his part and the whole thing runs more smoothly every time."

"You'd better wait!" said Nanette grimly. "It's going just too smoothly. Something's bound to happen that will make the whole thing go up in smoke!"

"I don't see how anything could go very wrong, with Mrs. Mouse on the job. She's so fine. The way she knows how to teach the dancing, the acting, everything! Seems as if she ought to have been an actress herself."

"No, it's because she's never really grown up, at least I think that must be it. She's so—so—well, like one of us. Not just interested in us, but interested, really and truly, in everything that we're interested in. Us kids, I mean. I can't exactly explain it, but the more you get to know her the more you'll see what I'm trying to say."

"I think I do now," said Gail understandingly. "You feel natural with her, sort of, and you don't usually, with grown-ups."

"That's it. I just love her," Nanette finished with conviction.

The next day, when Gail came down to breakfast, she was astonished to find Nanette waiting for her on the front steps. It was a cool morning and the girl was shivering in spite of the faded blue sweater she had on.

"Why, Nanette, come on in! You must be frozen. Dad's got a fire started in the living room and we're going to have our breakfast in front of it. You come and have



some, too." Gail drew her friend in, closing the door behind her. "My, but you're shivering! How long have you been out there waiting for me? You should have called under my window!"

"Gail, I am so thrilled! That's what's making me shiver!" Nanette ignored the questions, seeming not to have even heard them. She drew a long narrow box from under her sweater. "I've found it!" she said. "I've hunted every morning, early, before rehearsal time, and afternoons whenever I could. Now it's turned up!"

"You mean Mr. Cobbler's papers?" Gail took the box eagerly in her hands. It was heavily coated with rust and a corner had been completely rotted through, showing a glimpse of papers inside it. "Oh, Nanette, how simply wonderful! Where did you find it?"

"In the cellar, not far from where we looked, you and Andy and I. But it had been all covered with cement. That mean old stepfather must have put it down there and then buried it in fresh cement. So he could tell his wife it was there, I suppose, and still leave very little chance for her son to find it."

"But then why did he send word by his friend for Mr. Cobbler to come up here and hunt for it, or rather for the valuable papers? That's just crazy!"

"No, it isn't, in a way," Nanette said slowly. "I guess, maybe, he was just like 'most everybody, that stepfather. He wasn't all good or all bad, and when he thought he was dying he tried to bring the good in himself to the top."

"And so he sent word to our Mr. Cobbler"—Gail finished the train of thought for her—"but managed to be sort of tantalizing about it. Well, anyway, you've found it for him, and I hope he'll be properly grateful! But you haven't said exactly how you came upon the box. Do go on! How did we happen to miss it?"

"We'd forgotten about the tide," Nanette said.

"The tide?" repeated Gail.

"Yes. Don't you remember the tapping sound I said I couldn't explain? And Mr. Cobbler got all excited about it? Well, I made up my mind I'd find out about that if it was the last thing I did in Cobblers' Knob before I left it."

"Here, let's sit in front of the fire," Gail interrupted. "Breakfast will soon be ready. This is so exciting! And you're still shivering." She had steered Nanette into the sitting room, and now they both settled themselves on the floor before the crackling open fire. "Now," she continued, putting the rusted box between them, "start at the beginning and tell me the whole thing. Don't leave out a single bit!"

"There isn't much more to tell. It was the tapping really, that led me to the spot. I noticed it only came when the tide was high, and I couldn't seem to be at the Knob at just the right time. So I tried specially, and finally, one morning, it happened exactly right. As soon as I'd got into the house I heard it, a tapping and every now and then a gurgling sound as if water was rushing out of a narrow place. I went down cellar with a flash. That

crawl space leading out from the cellar was all awash. The tide must be running extra high, I thought. I had to wait until it had dropped a bit and then, almost at once, I found it."

"The box?" interrupted Gail.

"No, a hole washed out by the sea water. It was over in a corner, not in the floor but in the wall, low down. The tides must have been working under it for years, bit by bit, hollowing out the cement. There was a space going down to the rocks below, but the box was stuck in a crevice just above the reach of the water."

"Jeepers!" breathed Gail. "Would the sea have sucked out the box finally if you hadn't found it?"

"If there'd been a rip tide in a winter storm it would have, I'm sure. But anyway, there it was, safe and sound, and here it is now!"

"Are you going to let Mr. Cobbler know—send him a letter or something?"

Nanette nodded. "Right away. Can you let me have some note paper?"

"Of course, but oh, Nanette, do you suppose it will mean he'll fix up Cobblers' Knob for himself and it won't ever be yours any more?"

"I would if it was me. But there isn't anything I can do about it."

Nanette stayed for breakfast, and after it she and Gail composed a letter to Mr. Cobbler, which they dropped in the mail box on their way to rehearsal.



## 12. *The Missing Papers*

That morning, and for several days thereafter, the part of Puck was very indifferently acted. Nanette knew her lines and her business, but her heart and mind were no longer in the play; she moved mechanically and with no sprightliness whatever. No elf could have been so listless and leaden-footed! The cast all noticed it and looked uneasily to Mrs. Mouse to correct the matter, but she said nothing and seemed to ignore it.

Finally Gail spoke to the librarian. "Nanette isn't really in the part any more, is she? Do you suppose she'll be all right when the time comes?"

Mrs. Mouse's eyes were following the spiritless Puck as she answered, "Yes, to both your questions. The child is worried and depressed and she's lost her sparkle. But she'll get it back, especially if the thing that's worrying her doesn't happen."

It sounded, Gail thought, as if Mrs. Mouse really knew what that was, and, though she did not ask it, Mrs. Mouse evidently read the question in her face.

Yes, I know all about Cobblers' Knob. Nanette tells me a lot of things, almost as if I were her mother."

There was a little hint of wistfulness in her tone, and it flashed upon Gail that she was thinking, "I wish I were."

As for the two girls themselves, one subject was uppermost in their minds. Every morning, as Gail woke up, she said to herself, I wonder if Mr. Cobbler will get here today! And with Nanette the thought was coupled with another: I wonder if this will be the last time I can go freely into Cobblers' Knob and make believe it is mine.

The days slipped by. They watched the mail for letters and lingered about the bus station, thinking he might be arriving on one of them. But always, it seemed to them, anything connected with the Knob ended in a surprise. And so it turned out this time.

The next Sunday was soft and warm, one of those August days that begin in a mist that burns away toward ten o'clock, leaving the sky a limpid blue and the sea smooth and opalescent. There was no rehearsal, of course, but Nanette appeared at Gail's cottage soon after breakfast.

"Let's walk out to the Knob," she said. "I have to go to Sunday School a little later and take the two oldest children. But I—well—I just feel as if I have to see the old

place again this morning. Will you come with me?"

"Of course," said Gail, more than willing. "It will be lovely in the mist. Wait till I tell Mother."

They walked along the road, hearing the waves, which were still invisible behind the veil of mist, washing lazily against the rocks.

"I wonder if he'll come today," mused Nanette. No need to say who he was.

"He might," Gail said, and wanted to add, "But I really hope he doesn't." There was something about the quiet summer day that made her long to have things stay just as they were, and especially without any threat of unhappiness for Nanette. But she did not say it. Both girls seemed unable to speak freely about Mr. Cobbler—perhaps because their feelings about him were so mixed. They wanted sincerely to have him get the papers that belonged to him and so mend the misfortunes of his life, as they felt confident they would. And yet, and yet—! Nanette did not realize fully why she wanted so desperately to claim the old house as her special refuge from her frequent troubles. Nor could Gail understand entirely why Nanette felt so strongly about it. But she knew enough, and she loved Nanette enough to feel deeply and sympathetically with her.

As they approached Cobblers' Knob they both thought they had never seen it look so lovely. The fog was lifting, but still floated thinly about the old gray

house, hiding, or at least softening, the scars that time and neglect had left on it. The tall grasses in the front yard were wet and sparkling as the girls pushed through them, and the broken fan over the front door caught a gleam of light and color in one of the panes as the sun worked its way through the last tatters of mist.

Nanette sighed deeply and Gail slipped a hand in hers. They pushed the front door open and stood for a moment in the hall.

"Hi," said a man's voice above them, "who's there?"

"Oh, Mr. Cobbler!" cried Nanette, recognizing the voice. "It's us! Gail and me. When did you get here?"

He came down the stairs then, looking just as they had seen him before, except that there was a light of expectancy in his face that was pleasant to see.

"Well, if it isn't my two young friends and benefactors," said he, shaking hands with Nanette and then with Gail. "At least I hope you are benefactors also. Where's the box? I haven't been able to sleep o'nights for thinking of it!"

"It's at my house," Gail said. "Nanette thought it would be safer to leave it there than here."

"Wise child," said Mr. Cobbler approvingly. "But take me to it with all possible speed!"

"Why were you so long in coming?" asked Nanette as they turned and went out of the front door.

"My job, child. I couldn't throw up my part in an

honest-to-goodness play on the bare chance of your having found me a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, could I?

"And besides," he added after a moment, striding ~~along~~ so fast they could barely keep up with him, "a play must go on, no matter what happens to the fortunes of the actors. So I had to wait till after the evening performance yesterday. Then I hitch-hiked all the way from the city, arriving here at cock-crow. I didn't think you'd mind, Nanette, if I rested a bit on your divan?" He looked at her, questioning, smiling, assured of her friendliness before she answered.

"Of course I wouldn't mind! I wouldn't mind, anyway, but I guess I owe you something for rent after using your house for so long, the way I have."

"Think nothing of that," said Mr. Cobbler, as seriously as if the "rent" were an important matter. "And if those papers are the sort I think they are, the indebtedness will be all on my side."

There was a moment's silence and then Gail voiced a question that still puzzled her. "Mr. Cobbler, when we were looking for the papers we found that queer shaft in the dining room closet behind a sliding panel, you know. And we thought that must be where the papers were, but it wasn't, of course. What in the world was that ever used for?"

"My stepfather had that put in," Mr. Cobbler said. "I



never knew of its actually being used, but he was always in terror of being caught with his smuggled goods on his hands."

"But he couldn't have dropped bottles down there, could he?" asked Nanette.

"Oh, it wasn't liquor he smuggled, although I guess he did do some of that, too. It was diamonds."

"Diamonds!" cried both girls together.

"Yes, he was an expert, quite famous in a way—or shall we say infamous?"

"But the secret room and the room in the cellar under it—he wouldn't have needed those to hide diamonds in, would he?" said Gail.

"Those rooms were in the house when it was built. Nobody ever knew much about them, but they were the main reason why my stepfather bought the place. Hiding and getting away from the law was always on his mind. Kind of a terrible way to live when you come to think of it."

"Did he ever use them?" Nanette asked.

"Not that I know of."

"Then the mystery of Cobblers' Knob goes back to the Underground Railroad and a grand purpose after all!" Nanette looked much relieved at the thought.

When they reached Gail's cottage, they found her mother and father sitting out on the porch enjoying a few moments of Sunday laziness. Nanette introduced Mr.

Cobbler to them while Gail ran upstairs to get the box from its hiding place.

"So you are the owner of the old house on the rocks?" said Mr. Netherby, after he had asked Mr. Cobbler to sit down.

"Yes, the last living heir," he replied, "if I can rightfully claim it in the eyes of the law and the tax collectors! Have the girls told you about our meeting, and the strange quest I set for them?"

"Gail has told us something about it and you, but apparently it has been kept pretty much veiled in secrecy!"

"Good for the girls! I had every reason not to wish the matter talked about, for the present at least. If the mysterious hidden box contains anything of real value I shall publish it abroad, as soon as I have retrieved my fortunes!" He turned and smiled at Nanette, who had been watching him silently, and she gave him back a smile that was determinedly friendly but not really happy.

At that moment Gail appeared with the rusted box in her hands. Mr. Cobbler sprang up and took it from her, making no attempt to hide his eagerness. His fingers trembled as he pried open the lid, using a heavy pen knife.

Inside there were legal-looking papers, yellow with age, stained with damp and rust, but apparently whole and legible. With infinite care Mr. Cobbler took them out, leafed through them, and then let out his breath in a long sigh.

The four others who had been watching so intently they had scarcely moved, relaxed a bit also.

Without a word Mr. Cobbler replaced the papers in the box, laid in on the table, then turned to Nanette and kissed her. Still holding both her hands in his he said, in a voice that shook a little in spite of his efforts to control it, "My dear, this means more to me than money, more than you can understand. It gives me the right to my name, the proof that I really belong to my family, a fact that my stepfather tried his best to make me doubt."

"Oh I am glad, so very glad," said Nanette tremulously. "You see I know just how it feels—not to belong."

"But isn't there money there, too?" Gail sounded a little disappointed. "We hoped there'd be gold pieces, lots of them, and from the weight of the box we were sure there would be!"

"No pirate gold, no Spanish doubloons," laughed Mr. Cobbler. "The weight you felt came from this, in the bottom of the box!" He removed the papers again and took out a square of heavy metal. "This is the family seal, rightfully mine as the last of a not-too-honorable family. But there is gold—or at least, what will produce it. These papers include some property rights but are mostly old and still valuable stocks and bonds. They will net me plenty when the interest has been brought up to date."

He was smiling happily now; the emotional tension was broken. Mrs. Netherby asked him whether he had had

breakfast, and, finding he had not, insisted on putting on a fresh pot of coffee and cooking him eggs, bacon, and toast. They all sat around him while he ate it and talked of his childhood at Cobblers' Knob, of his frequent homesickness for the old place and of his wandering, hand-to-mouth existence as a second-rate actor.

"And now you can live just as you choose, can't you?" asked Nanette. "Will you—will you be fixing up the Knob and living there?"

Gail held her breath, waiting for the answer. Mr. Cobbler had set down his coffee cup and was looking thoughtfully at Nanette.

"I haven't decided yet just what I will do with Cobblers' Knob," he said, and then remained quiet for some time, seeming scarcely to hear the remarks passed by the others or even the questions directed to him.

Suddenly Nanette jumped up. "Gosh!" she exclaimed, "I forgot all about Sunday School! It will be awful late by the time I get back! Mrs. Murphy will take my head right off!"

"I'll drive you back," said Mr. Netherby, "and then take you all to the Church."

Before Nanette could thank him, Mr. Cobbler stood up with a wave of his hand which included all four of them.

"Wait just a minute, Nanette—all of you—I've got something to say that is very important. Would you give

me a sheet of paper and a pen, Mr. Netherby? Now, in your presence as witnesses, I am going to deed over the property of Cobblers' Knob to my friend Nanette—what's the last name? I've forgotten! DuBois—oh, yes—to my friend Nanette DuBois, to be hers and hers only as long as she wants it!"

There was a breathless hush, broken in a moment by a happy cry from Gail. "Oh Mr. Cobbler, how wonderful! How perfect! You don't know what it will mean to her!"

Nanette herself stood speechless, pale as a ghost, with her big eyes looking bigger and darker than ever in her white face.

Mr. Cobbler sat down again at the table where he had been eating his breakfast, pushed his dishes away, and wrote for some moments in silence. At last he got up and handed the paper he had been writing on to Mr. Netherby, who read it through. Mr. Netherby looked at Mr. Cobbler as if he were going to ask a question, then apparently thought better of it and signed his name as a witness. Mrs. Netherby, directing a happy smile at Nanette, signed too. Then Mr. Cobbler handed the sheet to Nanette.

"There it is, my dear," he said, "the statement of my gift to you of Cobblers' Knob. If there are any legal difficulties about it, I will see that they are made right. You have my written, witnessed word that from now on the old house is yours entirely."



### 13. *Unexpected Difficulties*

Nanette was not one to pour out confidences—her joys or her sorrows—on anybody who crossed her path. As she had kept secret her discovery and use of old Cobblers' Knob and her sense of truly possessing it, so now she talked to no one except Mrs. Mouse and, of course, Gail about the amazing circumstances that had made it really hers. But the whole cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* knew that something must have happened to their Puck! Nanette's feet scarcely touched the ground, she danced, she leaped, she trod on air, she was Puck himself! It was wonderful! Mary Hueston watched her, round-eyed, in

her Peaseblossom scene, and almost forgot her own lines. "Why, she *is* Puck," she said, as she danced back into the bushes with the other fairies. "She just isn't human any more, I'm almost scared of her!"

"Afraid she'll transform you into a donkey as she—I mean he—did old Nick Bottom?" said the girl who was Queen Titania, laughing.

"Could be!" said Mary. "My, but she's good! Our play is going to be just swell if it goes on like this!"

And it got better and better. As Nanette's mood had unconsciously depressed the cast when she was down, so her joy and high buoyancy of spirits infected them all. They lived and moved in the atmosphere of rollicking gaiety which was the very air the play breathed.

"Oh, Gail!" cried Nanette throwing her arms around her friend at the end of one of the rehearsals. "I'm so happy, I think I'm going to burst!"

"Don't—just yet!" warned Gail. "We need you!"

"I know, and things never seem to be this fine for long. I'll probably have an awful crash if I stay up in the air much longer. I'm too happy!"

"You mean about Cobblers' Knob?"

Nanette nodded, but Gail really need not have asked the question.

They had started back along the Point road toward Gail's cottage. Nearly every morning now after rehearsal, which kept them later than it had, Nanette took lunch

with her friend and then the two of them went out to Cobblers' Knob for the afternoon. The feeling of ownership filled Nanette with a new desire to fix the place up, and Gail was as interested as she was, and of great material help, for she constantly claimed from her mother household goods no longer needed at Windswept. And Mrs. Netherby, also much interested in the project, gave them many things or bought articles that she knew would be useful or pretty and attractive.

Nanette pried open the downstairs inside shutters, letting in light. She cleaned, swept, and scrubbed floors until the whole place looked spic and span. Unfortunately the process had to be many times repeated, as the continual fall of plaster made such a condition difficult and discouraging to maintain. But it was all fun for both of them. Mr. Netherby, after he and his wife had been taken to inspect the house, said he would gladly hire them both as permanent window washers at his cottage.

"Oh, but that wouldn't be so much fun!" laughed Gail.

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Netherby. "Just think what a howl I would bring down on myself if I even expected you, Gail, to keep your room as immaculate as Cobblers' Knob!"

On this particular noon, however, as the two sauntered back to lunch after the rehearsal, Gail failed to rise to the high spirits of her companion. She was worried, definitely worried, but she did not want Nanette to guess that she



was, so she tried hard to sound carefree and enthusiastic about everything her friend suggested.

"You know," Nanette was saying, "I feel different about the old house now that it is really mine. I don't want to keep it a secret any more, and I was thinking it would be fun to have a housewarming. We could ask your gang—or maybe the whole cast, after the play is over—to come in some afternoon, and we could serve pop or ginger ale and sandwiches and cookies. And maybe—I'm not sure I'd want to do this—but maybe we'd show them the secret room, and tell them about the Cobblers, and make up some stories about smugglers to tell them."

"Ye-es," said Gail, not very enthusiastically. "I guess that would be all right."

"You *guess* it would be all right? Why wouldn't it be? The place is mine, isn't it?"

"I know—only—well, you don't want to get it all talked about too soon, do you?"

"Why not? What's the matter with you, anyhow, Gail? You're so sort of down-dumpish this morning!"

"I don't mean to be, and it would be fun having everybody in and telling about it. And it would help keep us all together after the play is over. I never did think much of the way our gang stuck so close by themselves, never letting anybody new in—or me out!"

"Well, then, let's do it! Let's plan this afternoon."

But Gail could not seem to put her heart into plans that

day, and after an hour or so at the Knob, the two girls decided to go home. Nanette looked puzzled and a little hurt, and Gail impulsively caught her arm as they were about to separate.

"Nanette," said she, "please don't think I'm not interested or anything. I love Cobblers' Knob almost as much as you do, and I'm crazy about doing things here, but to-day—well, I'm just kind of worried and I guess I've lost my pep."

"Worried!" cried Nanette. "What on earth can you have to worry about?"

"I guess 'most anybody can find things to worry about," Gail said vaguely.

"If they try hard enough?" added Nanette. "You must have to try awful hard!" There was a grim note in her voice that nettled Gail.

"I suppose you think everything in my life is altogether perfect!"

Nanette said nothing, but the expression on her face said as plainly as words, "Well, isn't it?"

"Nobody's is!" Gail snapped. "And if you're happy about yourself there's always somebody else to worry about!" Tears sprang to her eyes, very foolishly. She brushed them away with her hand and tried to smile. It was their nearest approach to a quarrel.

"Oh Gail, I'm sorry! That was just horrid of me," cried Nanette, all repentance. "I love you better than anybody

else in the world, except maybe Mrs. Mouse, and now I've made you cry."

"No you haven't," said Gail stoutly. "I'm just kind of unreasonable, tired maybe. Let's—let's forget all this—and come back tomorrow afternoon and go on with planning our housewarming."

They separated then, Nanette taking the short cut across the moors, which was the quickest way to the village, and Gail going along the sea road to her cottage.

It wasn't fair, Gail thought, that Nanette should take her downheartedness amiss when it was really concern for Nanette herself that caused it. But then, the girl couldn't know that, of course. If she knew the whole story she would have great cause to worry herself. Gail went over in her mind the talk she and her mother and father had had the night before. Dad had not been happy over that scene in which Mr. Cobbler had dramatically turned over the ownership of Cobblers' Knob to Nanette.

"I don't think he can do it!" he said over and over to Gail and her mother as they sat in Dad's study, where they often gathered for family discussions. "If he's been hard up for years he certainly hasn't been paying the back taxes, and how long has that old place been deserted?"

"Twenty years at least; maybe twenty-five," said Mother. "We've been coming here to Windswept for more than fifteen years, haven't we, Dad? And Cobblers'

Knob had been vacant for a long time before that. It's a wonder it hasn't gone to pieces completely."

"They built well in those days," said Mr. Netherby, drawing on the pipe he had just lighted.

"But why couldn't Mr. Cobbler give it to Nanette if he wanted to?" Gail asked. "He owns it, doesn't he?"

"That's just it. He probably doesn't," her father went on to explain. "I don't know just what the laws and customs are in this state about unpaid taxes, but usually the county doesn't wait more than three years for taxes to be paid; then, if they aren't forthcoming, the place is put up for auction on the steps of the county courthouse, and the highest bidder gets it."

"Oh dear!" sighed Gail, "then somebody we don't know about may own Cobblers' Knob, and not Mr. Cobbler at all?"

Mr. Netherby nodded.

"But suppose nobody wanted to buy it?" asked his wife.

"Then it would belong to the county."

"Seems funny any owner—even the government—would let that fine old house be so neglected and almost go to pieces," said Gail.

"If nobody wanted it, what would be the use of the county's fixing it up? Nobody would want his taxes used to rebuild dilapidated old houses that people couldn't live

in," Mr. Netherby went on. "But, of course, we don't know the taxes haven't been paid. I'm just wondering whether it would be wise for me to make inquiries about it or just leave things alone. Chances are it's been neglected and forgotten for so long that nobody will bother Nanette's possession of it until she has grown up and doesn't want to play in it any more."

"Or else the whole house drops to pieces and slides into the sea," Mrs. Netherby added.

"Mother!" said Gail reproachfully, "I can't bear to have you talk about Cobblers' Knob that way, as if you didn't care what happened to it! And it would just break Nanette's heart if she lost it now."

"That's the trouble." Mr. Netherby took the pipe out of his mouth and scowled as he pushed the tobacco down in the bowl of it with his thumb. "The poor mite has made a nest for herself there. It is something to cling to, something she feels that she belongs to as well as that it belongs to her. It is easy to understand. The house is a symbol for her of the security she has never had. It will hurt her more deeply than we can realize if it is snatched away from her now."

"Dad!" cried Gail, suddenly jumping up as the thought occurred to her. "Couldn't we pay the taxes, or buy it back without saying anything to anybody?"

"I'm afraid that would be altogether too much money

to pay for a symbol, my dear." Mr. Netherby smiled at her as he relighted his pipe, and Gail sat down again, disappointed.

"Didn't Mr. Cobbler say something about making legal things right?" asked Mother after a pause. "Mightn't he pay whatever the county demanded to get it back? After all, if that old box of papers means money to him, he must realize that it is entirely due to that child's searching that he has it!"

"I doubt if his sense of gratitude would carry him that far," Mr. Netherby said dryly. "I think I will just inquire around a bit and see if I can learn how long the taxes have lapsed and just what the story would be if they are twenty-five years or more overdue, which I think is probably the case." He turned to Gail with the particularly impish grin he used for her special benefit. "And now, young 'un, get thee to bed, and that right speedily! Stop worrying about other people's troubles and carrying other people's burdens! It's a bad trait, but I love you for it!"

She had gone up to him to kiss him good night, and he drew her down into his lap for a hug, tousled her hair, and gave her a love-pat spank. She ran upstairs to bed, her heart and mind full of many things—most of all love for this father and mother of hers, to whom she belonged as surely and completely as if she had been born to them—more so, perhaps. She knew, without any need for words

on the subject, how close the three of them were, how the happiness or trouble of one meant the joy or unhappiness of the other two also. She had taken it all for granted when she was little, but now she realized it more, and she loved Father and Mother more deeply than ever.

And she thought of Nanette again with a sinking heart—Nanette who didn't belong to anybody, and for whom nobody really cared. If Cobblers' Knob took the place of a family and home to her in any smallest way she must keep it! She must! But how?

She tossed restlessly about for a long time. Then she heard her father and mother coming upstairs to bed. **I**r must be very late, she thought.

Her door was pushed open ever so softly, and there stood Mother with the hall light behind her.

"Yes?" said Gail.

Mrs. Netherby came in and sat down on the edge of her bed. "I thought you might be worrying a little about Nanette," she said. "Don't be anxious, darling. You and Dad and I will try our best to find some way to work things out."



## 14. *More Worries*

After that, Gail tried to put aside all anxiety about Nanette and Cobblers' Knob, feeling sure something would be worked out whereby the girl could keep possession of it. But the thought still preyed upon her, especially as time went on and her father said nothing more about it.

Then a new difficulty turned up which put the old house completely out of her mind and Nanette's also. Rehearsals for the play had been going well and the cast had reached that dangerous stage when everybody felt overconfident and consequently a little bored. The date for the performance had been set for August thirtieth, a Saturday, so that the fathers who commuted from Boston for the weekends could be caught. Already a gratifying



number of tickets had been sold, chairs had been promised from the local funeral home, and programs were being mimeographed. Just ten days were left to polish up the acting, complete the outfit of costumes, and attend to the hundred and one little details that always crop up at the last minute. Gail carried lists about with her wherever she went. Andy gloated loudly over his advance sale of tickets, and little Mary Hueston developed a habit of pouncing whenever she moved, in an effort to attain a fairy-like method of alighting suitable to Peaseblossom. Mary had the best will in the world and loved her part so that no one could possibly have the heart to take it away from her. But the fact remained that she was solid and heavy and not in the least elfin!

The young actors were all gathered one morning as usual on Mrs. Whipple's back lawn, waiting for Mrs. Mouse to begin their rehearsal—all, that is, except Nanette. Fifteen minutes went by without a sign of Mrs. Mouse, then half an hour. Everbody began to get restless.

"I wonder what's up," cried Joe, always uneasy when he wasn't actively doing something. "Mrs. Mouse has never been late before."

"I could do my Peaseblossom scene without her if only Puck would show up. Where's Nanette?" said Mary Hueston.

As if in answer to her question Nanette burst into the

midst of them. She was breathless, had evidently been running, and she looked worried.

"Mrs. Mouse is sick," she said, as all crowded around her. "I had to get the doctor and do a lot of things around the place for her. She won't be back with us for a week, the doctor says, maybe more."

"My goodness!" said Gail, "what shall we do?"

"Give it up, I guess," said Joe, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm kind of fed up on rehearsals, anyway."

"Not on your life!" Nanette flared at him. "We've taken money for the show and promised people a good one. We're not giving it up at this late date! Not for you, Joe Prentice, or anybody else!"

"I should say not!" Mary Hueston backed her up. "When I think of the way I've worked over this play—" She finished her sentence with a pounce instead of words, but any thistle she might have alighted on would certainly have been crushed!

Some of the older ones grinned. "That's the spirit," said Gail, approvingly. "Let's go right on now with our rehearsal just as if Mrs. Mouse were here. Nanette, you can be the coach."

They tried to get into their parts and go through the scenes but the whole thing fell to pieces. Joe overacted and clowned to such an extent that everyone got the giggles. Nanette found she could not conduct the coaching and carry out her part in the Puck scenes at the same time.

She gave Gail the book but Gail seemed to find it impossible to keep her mind on the lines in order to prompt, and watch the acting too. Altogether it was most discouraging. Nanette was almost ready to cry when she finally called off the rehearsal for that day.

"Now listen to me," she said sternly, "we meet again tomorrow morning at the usual time, and don't anybody dare not come! We've got to do a whole lot better than we have today."

And after they had all left—except Gail, who was picking up scattered properties and a few Coke bottles dropped around—Nanette ran to her. "Oh Gail," she cried, "whatever shall we do? Mrs. Mouse is awfully sick. I don't know what it is but she looks dreadful! I'm terribly worried about her, and her heart is so set on this play we've just got to do it!"

"Maybe the kids will act better tomorrow," Gail said, trying to comfort her. "They really want to give the play and they'd all be terribly disappointed if we had to stop it entirely—all but Joe."

"Joe gives me a pain in the neck!" said Nanette, with conviction. "All boys do, more or less, except Andy. He's quite decent."

"Where did he disappear to, anyway?" said Gail, suddenly realizing she had not seen him since the beginning of the rehearsal. "Probably gone to sell some more tickets," she answered herself. "He's a good scout, and a

wonderful business manager. Maybe if he stayed around tomorrow he could make everybody behave better."

"Maybe, but I doubt it," Nanette said.

They had finished tidying up the lawn by this time and went out to the road in front of the house. "Come on back with me for lunch," Gail said.

But Nanette shook her head. "I've got to go and get Mrs. Mouse something to eat, if she'll eat it."

"Does she live all alone?" asked Gail.

"Yes, in a sweet little house. Her husband is dead and her baby daughter died a long time ago, eight or nine years I guess. It's kind of tough, when you're sick, not to have anybody to take care of you. But she has me. I'll be there every minute I can, and she says I help a lot."

"Wish I could help, too. Do you suppose I could do anything?"

"I guess I'm all she needs."

They were quiet for a few moments, each busy with her own thoughts. Gail felt hurt a little; Nanette's words seemed to push her out. But that was foolish, she told herself. Naturally Mrs. Mouse wouldn't want another girl, one who was almost a stranger, around the house when she was sick.

"I was only thinking," she said after a moment, "maybe Mother would make her some of the extra special custard she cooks for me when I'm sick. I could take it to her house, but I wouldn't stay or bother any."

Nanette smiled her warm, radiant smile and Gail's momentary hurt vanished. "That would be wonderful," she said. "I only know how to cook a few things myself, and they're not what a sick person wants. Of course the neighbors will bring her stuff to eat and offer to help out but she likes best to have just me around."

"Tell me where she lives," said Gail. "I'm sure Mother will make the custard and I'll get it down to her this afternoon."

Mrs. Netherby was more than willing to make the dessert as soon as Gail had told her about Mrs. Mouse, and she drove her daughter down to the address Nanette had given, late that afternoon. She stayed in the automobile and let Gail take the custard in herself.

It was indeed a sweet little house, as Nanette had said, low and gray-shingled, with white blinds and ivy climbing all over one side and completely covering the outside chimney. Nanette came to the door in answer to her ring and Gail handed in the pretty bowl that her mother had fixed with such care.

Gail turned, expecting to leave at once, but Nanette caught her hand and drew her in, saying, "She's feeling a little better this afternoon, and she wants to see you."

They climbed the steep stairs that crowded the small hall and turned into the front bedroom. There lay Mrs. Mouse in a tall, old-fashioned four-poster. She looked very ill indeed, a bright spot of color burning in each

cheek and her lips parched and feverish. But she moved her head as the two girls came in and smiled weakly.

"You are very good, my dear, to bring this nice custard to me. Nanette has told me about it. And please thank your mother. It is most trying for me to be sick just now when the play needs so much work done on it. I—I want it to go through, I want it most desperately, for the sake of the children's room in the library, and because of the cast. All you girls and boys have done so well and worked so hard, it must not fail now." She put a trembling hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. "It must not fail! It must not!" she murmured over and over again.

Gail tiptoed out of the room with Nanette behind her. "Do you know what's the matter with her?" she whispered.

"The doctor gave it a long name that I can't remember. I guess it isn't dangerous, if you take care of it. But I heard him say she just couldn't get out of bed for at least a week."

"Why, that would take us almost up to the day of the performance!"

"Perhaps the kids will sober down tomorrow. They've just got to!" Nanette said fiercely.

"And how can Mrs. Mouse manage with nobody but you to take care of her?"

Nanette's head went up. "I guess I'm a good enough

nurse! I've taken care of children through measles and upset stomachs and everything."

"Oh I didn't mean you couldn't! I was wondering how you could manage with all you have to do at home, and the play and everything."

"Guess I'll just have to. And the neighbors will help out, of course."

As she went downstairs Gail caught a glimpse of a sunny living room with flowers in the windows, and an old-fashioned rocking chair near the open fireplace, in which stood black andirons with wood piled on them, ready to be lighted. It was a comfortable, homey sort of house; Gail, who was sensitive to beauty and atmosphere, warmed to it. One would be happy in a home like this, she thought. No wonder Nanette enjoyed being there and felt just a little bit jealous of anybody else coming in. And Mrs. Mouse was a grand person! But how could they manage about the play if she didn't get well soon?

She was quiet as they drove back to Windswept, and Mother, sensing her mood as she always did, was quiet too.



## 15. A Midsummer Night's Dream

The next morning every member of the cast turned up at Mrs. Whipple's except Joe and a village boy who had the part of one of the other funny men. Without them it was impossible to practice the Nick Bottom scenes. The fairies went through their parts and dances mechanically and with little spirit. Gail watched with a sinking heart. They just couldn't put on a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* if it didn't go better than that!

"It wouldn't be fair to the audience or us—or even Shakespeare!" she declared, as she and Andy and Nanette stood together talking it over, uncertain whether to call



the rehearsal off, or try again to force some life into it.

"I'm not worrying about Shakespeare," said Andy. "I guess the old boy has had to take poor performances of his stuff many times before this. He's probably turned in his grave enough to be used to it. What's biting me is that rough-neck brother of mine, and I think I will go out right now and find him and his pal and haul them back here. I'll bet anything they've gone fishing!"

"But Andy, if they're not any more interested in giving the play than that will they ever be any good in it?" said Gail mournfully.

"Don't you kid yourself," Andy answered with superior wisdom. "They'll perk up at the last minute, at least I know Joe will, and be swell. I've seen it happen before."

"But we can't stop rehearsing and just wait till the day of the performance," said Nanette. "Everybody'll forget their lines and everything. If we could only find somebody else to coach us! Nobody pays any attention to Gail and me."

"Wow, I've got an idea!" cried Andy, suddenly jumping into the air as if he'd been shot.

"Hold onto it!" cried Gail, laughing. "It must have hit you on the fly and given you an awful wallop!"

"What about that actor guy?" Andy went on. "You know, that Cobbler of Cobblers' Knob. Maybe we could get hold of him and hire him to coach the play for this last week!"

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Nanette beamed. "I know his address. We could write him!"

"But he's acting in a play himself," objected Gail the worrier. "At least he was when we saw him last."

"That may be over by now, or something. Summer-stock plays don't run long, you know. At least it's worth a try."

"Oh yes! And if we had a really-truly actor running the show everybody would buckle down and work, I'm sure they would." Nanette was all enthusiasm. "I know his address by heart. Let's get some letter paper and write him this minute!"

"Better telephone, long distance," said Andy. "There's no time to lose."

"We can phone from our cottage. Dad won't mind. Oh, I hope he can come!" Behind Gail's eagerness lay the added thought that, if Mr. Cobbler came to the Point again, her father could explain about the unpaid taxes at the Knob and he would be sure to fix it up some way so that Nanette's ownership would be unquestioned.

The three lost no time. They told the girls and boys in the cast, who were still hanging around, that there would be no more rehearsals till Monday morning.

"And then," said Nanette, "we may have a big surprise for you, so everybody come—sharp at nine!"

Then they took the shortest way to Windswept, jog-trotting most of the time in their impatience to get there.

Everything went fast and smoothly. Mrs. Netherby agreed at once to allow them to telephone, and helped them put the call through, person to person, so they would be sure to get Mr. Cobbler himself. It was agreed that Nanette should do the talking, and in a few moments she hung up the receiver and turned to the others with a happy face.

"He'll do it! He'll do it!" she cried and then danced around in her excitement. "The play he's in closes tonight. He'll take a bus up here to the coast tomorrow and stay with us till the performance is over! Oh Gail—Andy—isn't it too marvelous?"

"It certainly is!" cried Gail's mother, beaming as happily as the young folks. "We'll invite him to stay here, and then we can get better acquainted with him."

"How did he ever happen to agree so quickly?" Gail asked.

Nanette giggled. "He said : was his good-fortune fairy and my word was law! He wouldn't even listen when I said we wanted to hire him. Said he'd only be paying a little of his debt to me that way!"

The following Monday morning Mr. Cobbler, having been duly introduced to the cast, sat himself down in the middle of Mrs. Whipple's back lawn and watched the scenes of the play. He said not a word as the girls and boys went through it from start to finish. They were a

little self-conscious and uneasy, but they knew their lines and their "business," for Mrs. Mouse had drilled them thoroughly. And they acted their parts in all seriousness, with no fooling—a little too seriously, perhaps.

When they came to the end they all turned questioning eyes to Mr. Cobbler.

"That's fine," said he. "You're doing a good piece of work, but now let's forget it's work and just have fun! This is a fairy play, you know, and anything ridiculous might happen, even to making an ass out of a solemn peasant! Nick Bottom, you're the proof of it!"

Then he went through the scenes again with them, putting so much impishness and gay laughter into it that they all caught the spirit and had a rollicking good time. The morning was gone before they realized it, and they separated to go home to lunch, eager for the next morning's rehearsal.

And so it went, right up to the day of the performance. Andy, Gail, and Nanette were so busy with their respective tasks that they had little time to think about anything else. Mr. Cobbler proved to be a valuable drawing card in more ways than one. Word got about that the long-lost heir to Cobblers' Knob was present in person and was coaching the cast. Curiosity caught fire and the sale of tickets mounted. By August twenty-ninth Andy showed a very creditable list of advance sales and went into a huddle with Mrs. Whipple, as he expressed it, over

a make-shift ticket office at the entrance to her driveway.

Everybody wondered about the weather. If it should rain what would they do? "Borrow the high-school auditorium," said the practical Andy.

"But fairies just couldn't flit about on bare, ugly boards," moaned Mary Hueston. "We've just got to have the bushes and shrubs and lovely garden or we can't feel our parts."

"It would take more than a garden to make some of us feel light and flittish," said Lucy, stopping just in time to keep her remark from being too personal.

Mary sensed her meaning, however, and flounced away.

"For goodness' sake, be careful," warned Gail. "Mary's all right as she is, but if she gets to feeling injured, her Peaseblossom will weigh a ton!"

"If only we have good weather!" said everybody, time and again.

"And if only Mrs. Mouse can come," Nanette added fervently.

The morning of the thirtieth dawned clear and warm, a perfect summer day, but by afternoon there was more than a hint of change in the air. Sudden small gusts of wind blew erratically, first from one direction, then another. The heat felt oppressive and the sun went down in a bank of clouds, dull and threatening.

"The fishermen say there are storm warnings out for

small craft all down the coast," said Andy ominously, as the cast gathered after supper to get into their costumes. Mrs. Whipple had let them have a couple of rooms to dress in. Shrieks of excited laughter came from the girls' room but the boys got into their costumes quickly and soberly.

"Cross your fingers and hope that the rain stays off till the play is over," said Gail, hurrying about with safety pins, make-up, and encouragement wherever they were needed.

Mr. Cobbler, looking most immaculate and gay in a freshly pressed suit with a flower in his buttonhole, called them all together, workers as well as cast, behind the screen of young white cedar trees that served as backdrop. "Are you all here?" he said.

"Nanette isn't."

"Puck isn't here. Where is she?"

"Don't worry about Puck," said Andy. "She'll get here or bust. She's that kind."

But Gail looked uneasy and only half listened to Mr. Cobbler's final little "pep talk."

"Now just remember," he finished, "there's not a thing to worry about. If you forget your lines—which I know you won't!—make some up. Walk on air and have a grand time!"

"Hurrah for Mr. Cobbler!" cried someone. "Mr. Cobbler of Cobblers' Knob!" and everybody cheered lustily.

He put up his hand for quiet, and at that moment Nanette, complete in her Puckish costume, dashed in among them. "She's here!" she cried triumphantly. "She's here! Mrs. Mouse! She's sitting in a wheel chair in the front row. Oh, I'm so happy!" She did a cart wheel such as she had been practicing to use in the play, and came up, laughing, beside Mr. Cobbler who caught her hand.

"Let's give a cheer for Mrs. Mouse!" he said, and they gave it. "And then for our Puck, the new owner of Cobblers' Knob!"

They cheered again, though, except for Gail and Andy, they did not fully realize at the time just what Mr. Cobbler meant. Gail thought with a thrill of satisfaction that her father and Mr. Cobbler must have settled the tax question and now all would be right and as it should be.

At any rate the cheering put the finishing touch to the high spirits of the cast. Never were scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* given with more enthusiasm and sheer joy. The boys and girls went through their parts without a break and with perfect confidence, the audience caught their spirit, rocked with laughter at the funny men, and frolicked in imagination with the fairies, as if they were all young again and believed in them.

An exciting, unpredictable little wind tossed the shrubbery about, whisked at the filmy dresses of the fairies, and ran off with any unguarded bits of property. As the evening advanced it grew stronger, more tempestuous,

and during the last scene it carried away the voices of the young actors so that they could scarcely be heard. But they kept their heads and managed somehow. Then the rain fell in little wisps and flurries, but only after the last exit and the final burst of applause did it come down as if it meant business.

"What luck!" cried everybody. And then they ran for it! Such a scramble they had, getting themselves under shelter. The audience dashed for its cars, the cast rushed into Mrs. Whipple's house. In less than no time the "stage" was running rivers. Titania's bank "whereon the wild thyme blows" had melted into a mud pile, and the camp chairs where the audience had sat dripped drearily.

Nanette came flying into the house, the last of the cast to take refuge. Water dropped from her chin, and her thin costume clung to her, the green color running onto her arms and neck and bare legs, making her look like a half-drowned changeling.

"Mrs. Mouse thought it was wonderful," she said with satisfaction. "Somebody's taking her home in a car but she wouldn't go till she saw Mr. Cobbler and thanked him. She was so happy she almost cried."

"That's a queer way of showing it," said Mary, "but I guess I know what you mean. Did I really do all right?"

Nanette started to hug her but remembered just in time how wet she was. "You were a grand Peaseblossom!" she said heartily.



"So were you as Puck!" cried several.

When they had all changed their clothes they gathered in the front hall. Families with cars were waiting to deliver them in batches to their respective homes or hotels. Andy was counting his ticket money again, while Mrs. Whipple looked over his shoulder. "There!" he said with satisfaction. "After we've taken our expenses out we'll have nearly a hundred and twenty-five dollars to give to the library!"

"I'll make it up to a hundred and fifty," said Mrs. Whipple.

"You've done so much already," said Gail warmly. "It doesn't seem as if we ought to take a cent from you."

"It's been fun," said Mrs. Whipple, smiling.

"Yes, but it's been trouble, too. Anyway we thank you—don't we, kids?—ever and ever so much!"

When, at long last, Gail was settled in bed she was still too excited to go to sleep right away. Everything was so perfect! The play had turned out so well, and the rain had held off; Mrs. Whipple had been so nice about lending her place, and Mr. Cobbler had been just grand! Nanette, always Nanette, with her pale face and eager dark eyes, came into her thoughts. Nanette would have her house, Cobblers' Knob, that meant so much to her. . . . Maybe when she grew up she could have it done over and really live there. Nanette—how happy she seemed!



## 16. *Storm*

The next morning nobody called Gail and she slept late. The world still seemed to her a very satisfying place as she got herself some breakfast and took it into the living room, where she could talk to Mother as she ate. Mrs. Netherby was winding some yarn and was full of the play, and glad to talk of the happenings of the night before.

"Nanette was really far and away the best thing in it," she said. "That child has talent. Mr. Cobbler couldn't get over the skill with which she had worked up her part, and the way she stayed in the play when she wasn't saying anything, which seems particularly difficult for amateurs."

"Where is Mr. Cobbler?" asked Gail over a crunchy bite of toast.

"He left quite early, but he'll be coming back again."

"To see about Cobblers' Knob?" asked Gail. "Did you and Dad talk to him about that?"

"Yes, we did. Apparently no taxes have been paid for ever so long, just as we guessed, but for some reason the property has never been sold, so it reverted to the county. It really isn't worth much in money, you see. Only a little strip of rocky shore goes with the house, and the tide has been running so close to it, especially lately, washing away the ground around it, that probably nobody has ever wanted to buy it. At any rate, the authorities were very willing to sell it back to Mr. Cobbler for a rather small sum. They will finish up the deal when he comes back."

"Did he tell them why he wanted it?"

"No, I think he felt they would not understand. They acted as if they thought he was out of his mind in wanting it at all, but that did not bother him."

"Did that packet of papers mean an awful lot of money to him?" asked Gail.

"Quite a bit. They were mostly old stocks and bonds that are still good. Mercy! Listen to that rain!"

Gail got up and looked out of the window toward the harbor. It was an angry gray, flecked with whitecaps. The surf from the side of the Point that faced the open sea boomed so loudly they were conscious of it all the time, though usually they did not hear it at all when the windows were closed. "Some storm!" said she. "Suppose this had been the day set for our play!"

"Lucky for you it wasn't! I don't believe many people

would have ventured out even to go to the school auditorium if you'd had to give it there."

All day long the rain poured down in torrents, and the wind whistled around the house and tore at the trees. Gail had no wish to go out. She felt tired, lazy, and very contented. She wished she could see Nanette, but that, of course, was impossible. And all night the storm raged even more wildly.

By the next morning, however, the rain had stopped, though the wind still blew in tearing gusts and the sky looked sullen and heavy. One had to have lights on in the house and the sound of surf still beat almost continuously on the ears.

"It must be quite a sight out there on the rocky side of the Point," said Mr. Netherby.

"Let's bundle up and go out and see it," suggested his wife.

So they put on sweaters, and slickers over them, for the air was cold and still carried a threat of rain. Out on the road that led to Cobblers' Knob, where the sea ran close to the shore, they were surprised to see the waves towering like gray mountains and breaking with a thundering crash on the rocks. In places the water had washed over the road itself. They met other summer people out to see the surf.

"Must be the fringes of that southern hurricane," said one.

"How would you like to be out in a boat in a sea like that?" said another.

They all gathered in a somewhat sheltered spot back from the shore where they could watch the surf. It was frightening but wonderful, Gail thought. The waves rolled in with great crests of white foam, like long unbroken hills of gray-green. The granite rocks opposed them and they crashed and leaped into the air, flinging up stones and torn seaweed and spray that fell like rain as far back as the people were standing.

"You can see now how the shore gets washed away, even a rockbound shore like this!" Mr. Netherby shouted above the roar.

"And they say this is a rip tide, and going to run even higher in the next few days," another man shouted back to him.

Gail grew restive. "I think I'll walk on farther and have a look at the Knob," she said

"Keep well back from the shore," her mother cautioned.

There was something exciting about the incessant boom and roar of the huge waves. Gail found herself running and almost laughing with exhilaration. Life was wonderful, and she thought she must always live within sight and sound of the sea—in the summer, anyway.

Cobblers' Knob seemed just as usual, except that occasionally spray and flying pebbles, tossed high by the

waves, fell noisily on its roof. Gail thought how fine a view she would get of the angry ocean from the windows in the back of the house. Of course, Nanette would not be there; she would scarcely have taken the long walk from the village in all this wind. And besides, since the two girls had become such good friends she hardly ever failed to stop for Gail before going on to the Knob. But Gail knew it was all right for her to go in by herself any time she wanted to; Nanette had told her she must always feel free.

So Gail pushed through the wet grasses and weeds in the front yard, opened the door, and went in. The noise of the waves seemed stronger in the house than it had been outside, and there was a rushing, sucking sound as if the sea were washing in and out among the rocks the house was built on. She ran upstairs, eager to see from an upper window how close the tide was coming in.

The door of Nanette's special little room was closed, and as she approached it Gail was startled to hear a low, desperate sobbing. She flung the door open and found Nanette lying on her face on her divan, crying heart-brokenly. Roused by the sound of Gail's entry, she lifted her head and gazed at her friend with eyes bloodshot and swollen.

"Nanette! Nanette!" cried Gail, falling on her knees beside her. "What's the matter? What ever has happened?"

The girl drew a long, quivering breath that ended in a sob, reached out and took Gail's hand in her cold, moist one, then put her head down on the mattress again, shaking with uncontrollable weeping.

Gail felt instinctively that she must let Nanette cry it out before she fretted her with insistent questions. She drew closer, stroked her hand lovingly and waited. After a time the sobbing grew quieter and finally almost stopped.

"Got a handkerchief?" Nanette said. "I've used all mine up." She mopped her eyes and wet cheeks with the one Gail offered, then sat up.

"Can you tell me now?" Gail said gently. Between sobs, Nanette managed to tell her story.

"I've got to go away," she moaned. "Just, just when I was s-so happy. Mrs.—Mrs. Murphy is moving and—and she's not going to take welfares any more."

"Oh Nanette!" Gail broke in. "I'm so sorry! But isn't there someone else in town you can stay with? You never sounded as if you were very crazy about Mrs. Murphy."

"I'm not, but she's all right in her way. I've been boarded with lots worse than her. But—but I've almost got to feel that I belong here—with you for a friend—and Mrs. Mouse—and now Cobblers' Knob really mine." She cried again but more quietly.

"Did you just hear about it?" asked Gail.

Nanette nodded. "The welfare lady was very decent.

She—she didn't want me to be upset till the play was over, so she didn't tell me till yesterday. And—and now there's not much time. Mrs. Murphy's started to pack and—homes have been found for all of us kids, but not here. I'm to go to Westmoorland, the lady said."

Gail groaned within herself. Westmoorland was forty or fifty miles from the Point. To go so far it would mean for Nanette a complete break with life here, a different school, new people to get acquainted with, and no comfortable old Cobblers' Knob to give her some feeling of belonging. Poor Nanette! It wasn't fair this should happen just when her life was beginning to give promise of being natural and happy.

"But it can't be too late!" Gail cried desperately. "Surely that welfare lady, if she was so thoughtful about the play, might try again to find you a home here!"

Nanette shook her head. "It's no use. You don't know the welfare. Everything's got to go the way they plan, regardless."

"I wonder if Mr. Cobbler couldn't do something."

Nanette smiled bleakly, caught her breath in a final sob, and then got up. "It's no use," she repeated. "Nobody can do anything. I've met up with this before but it's never been half so bad."

In the moment of silence that followed there came a thunderous roar as a great towering comber broke on the rocks below the house. Water, not spray, fell on the roof,



and rattling pebbles, and there followed that odd rushing, sucking sound that Gail had noticed when she first went in. It seemed to come from the very foundations of the building and the walls shook and rocked as if with the impact of a great force.

"We'd better get out of here!" said Gail in alarm. "Sounds as if the whole place might be washed away."

"It's stood through all the storms of nearly a hundred years," said Nanette, unmoved. "I guess it can ride out this one. But I've got to go anyway. I've got to help at the house while Mrs. Murphy packs."

She moved listlessly to the window. Gail followed her and they both looked for a few moments out at the wild, tumultuous sea. It had covered the rocks a few yards from the house, and each wave seemed to run closer in than the one before.

"It must be high tide," said Nanette. "I've never seen the water come so far up the shore."

"Hope it doesn't rise any higher!" said Gail. "Come on, let's get out. Can't you come back to my house for lunch before you go home?"

"Home," Nanette repeated, tears coming to her eyes again. "I've never had a home, but this place has somehow almost felt like one."

Gail put her arms around her friend. "Don't give up hope yet. Maybe something can be done."

Nanette attempted a smile, but it was a dreary one.

They parted at the short cut over the moors and Gail went on thoughtfully and sadly toward her cottage.

"Maybe something can be done," she kept repeating to herself. "Something must be done; it just must! But what?"

Suddenly an idea struck her, a wonderful idea. She was so excited she almost cried out, and she broke into a run that brought her to her cottage breathless. She bounded in, slamming the door behind her, and called, "Mother! Mother! where are you?"

Mrs. Netherby appeared at the top of the stairs. Gail rushed up, two steps at a time. "Mother," she cried, "something terrible is happening to Nanette, and oh, Mother, we've got to adopt her!"

They had a long talk, excited at first, then sobering down. Mother was much concerned at Nanette's plight but unwilling to make any promises until Dad came home and they could talk it over with him.

"Even then," she warned Gail, "we'll have to think it over very carefully. It is a very serious thing, you know, to adopt a child, make yourself responsible for her for the rest of your life."

"You adopted me, didn't you?" Gail felt vaguely hurt at the turn the conversation had taken.

"Yes, dear. We wanted you so much, and we loved you from the first moment we laid eyes on you. We couldn't

have loved you more if you'd been born to us." She moved close to Gail and drew her head down on her shoulder.

"But couldn't you love Nanette too?"

"I think we could, darling, but you see the situation is a little different now, after all these years. We are not so young, and I am wondering more whether it would be quite fair to you and to her, to try to share our family love and closeness. Would there be danger of her always feeling like an outsider, coming to us so late? She's eleven years old, isn't she? And are you sure you would never feel the least bit jealous or pushed out with another child to share your parents' affection and all that means home to you? We can't rush into this thing without thinking it out thoroughly, without trying to imagine what the days and years ahead would be like for you and Nanette, and your mother and father, too."

Gail sighed deeply but said nothing. Perhaps when Dad came home that would settle the matter one way or the other.

But, as she might have expected, Dad felt just about the same way as Mother did. They were willing, evidently, but wanted to make sure of her feelings even more than of their own considered judgment.

It was agreed they would all three sleep on the matter. "And remember," Mrs. Netherby added, as she kissed

Gail good night, "say a little extra prayer for Nanette, and ask God to show us what is really His will for her and for us. Dad and I will do that, too."

It seemed hours before Gail could get to sleep. She kept picturing to herself what life would be with Nanette sharing it, day in and day out. Part of her thrilled to the thought, for she truly loved the girl, but in the bottom of her heart and mind was a little question: Could she bear to share Father and Mother and friends and home and all that made life precious to her? Or would the time come when she would resent anybody's being a Netherby daughter but herself? She flushed hotly in the dark as she faced that possibility. She was being selfish, horribly selfish! She had had so much all her life, of love and devotion, of caring, to say nothing of the security of home and the supplying of all her needs and wishes. And Nanette had never had any of these things. Gail wouldn't even admit to herself she could be so selfish. Tomorrow, she decided, she would tell her father and mother that she wanted Nanette for a sister more than anything else in the world. Then she slept. In the morning she went down to breakfast with a glad and undivided heart. Her parents, too, seemed pleased at her decision and declared themselves of the same mind. Dad would see the welfare worker and start operations for adoption, but in the meantime Gail was to say nothing whatever to Nanette.

"Just in case something should go wrong," her father

said. "We don't want the poor child to get her hopes up and then meet with another disappointment."

"What could go wrong?" Gail asked, all eagerness now to have Nanette come to them, and feeling that she could not bear to delay in easing her heartache.

"I don't know just what the laws about adoption are in this state. They might be fussy about our being from another state, you know. But don't worry about it!" He smiled as he noted her troubled face. "I don't anticipate any difficulty."

"The very minute you've found out, may I tell Nanette?"

"I think it might be wiser to let the welfare lady tell her," said Mother. "But Dad won't waste any time getting at the matter, will you, Dad?"

With that Gail had to be satisfied.



## 17. *The End*

For two days Gail saw nothing of Nanette and heard nothing about the plan for adoption. On the third day Mr. Netherby brought the welfare lady to the cottage to talk things over.

"Thought I'd better let you see what sort of a family we are," he said pleasantly, as he introduced his wife and daughter.

She was a kindly person; Gail could tell by her eyes and the little wrinkles around her mouth that made one sure she smiled a great deal. And there was no question but that she was concerned about Nanette, although she evidently knew nothing of Cobblers' Knob or the other

reasons that had made living at the Point so important in the child's eyes.

"It is too bad she has to be uprooted," the lady said, "though I am confident she will get used to the new home quickly."

"But it surely would be much better for her to really belong to a family," Mother put in.

"Oh indeed yes, it would be fine for her to be adopted. But there are so many things to consider, from your point of view even more than from hers. If you go into a thing like that too impulsively—a relationship which lasts for life—one or all of you may regret it, and soon. Of course, that would create most unhappy circumstances for the child, and it is her welfare I am looking out for." The lady turned to Gail as she finished and the girl realized with a pang that it was her attitude she was thinking about.

"I—I love Nanette," she said quietly, and the lady smiled and her eyes softened.

After that she spoke more encouragingly and definitely about the possibility of their adopting Nanette.

Mother gave them afternoon tea and they talked comfortably for some time. When the welfare lady got up to leave she said, "I would like to tell Nanette of this happy prospect for her myself, so—please"—she turned again to Gail—"don't say anything about it to her until she speaks to you, or I do."

"I won't," Gail promised, "but do, please tell her soon! She's so unhappy now, thinking she has to move away, and I want so to tell her she's going to belong to us!"

The lady said she would hurry things along as fast as she could, and left them.

After that, Gail was on pins and needles. She told herself she just couldn't wait for her new sister to come to her, and if ever the tiniest doubt slipped into her mind—any least fear that the two of them might not always be happy together—she forced it under cover and forgot about it.

The storm had cleared after a three-day blow and much rain, but the surf still crashed and roared upon the rocks. The sea was wild and angry, and the tide ran higher than it had been known to run in years. Every day, and often twice or three times a day, Gail had walked out to Cobblers' Knob. And always she slipped in the front door and called and listened, hoping to find Nanette there. She did not stay long, for somehow there was something almost frightening about the old house now. Even when the tide was low and the breaking surf more distant, the place seemed to be full of odd creakings and raspings. And, anyway, it was lonely and forlorn without Nanette.

She wanted very much to go to Mrs. Murphy's house and see and talk to her there, but she felt that might not



be wise. In the first place, Nanette was undoubtedly busy every minute helping Mrs. Murphy pack, or minding the children. In the second place, Gail wondered whether she would have the strength of character not to say a single word about their plan for her, especially if she found the girl grieving and unhappy!

So she waited, her first thought in the morning and her last at night being, I wonder if I'll see Nanette today, or tomorrow morning, as the case might be.

Then she appeared! Gail had set out for the Knob early in the morning, being more anxious and uneasy than ever. She met Nanette at the point where the short cut came into the shore road. As soon as she looked into her face Gail knew that Nanette knew, but she said nothing, only threw her arms around her and kissed her.

Nanette's radiantly happy face clouded for a moment. She stood facing Gail, holding both her hands, her eyes troubled.

"Oh Gail," she said after a moment, "please understand me. I—I am so happy it hurts, but there's something else that hurts too."

"You're going to be my sister!" said Gail warmly.

Nanette slowly shook her head. "We're going to be dearest and best friends always and always," she said with a little tremble in her voice, "but, Gail, I'm not going to be your sister truly because—oh dear, it's hard to explain.

I think your father and mother are just wonderful and I love them already—and you know how much I love you—”

“Then why—?” Gail drew her hands from Nanette’s and stared at her, troubled and uncomprehending.

“Mrs. Mouse,” Nanette blurted out. “She wants me, too. She’s going to adopt me, and oh, Gail, she needs me! She misses her little girl who died, and she says she’s always loved me, ever since I came here, and—and—I love her. You’ve got your family all complete. You don’t need me. You’re just being sweet and kind, and I love you for it, but it’s Mrs. Mouse I belong with.”

Tears stung Gail’s eyes for a moment, but she brushed them away with a smile, slipping her arm around Nanette’s waist. “Let’s go to the Knob,” said she. “I understand how it is.”

They walked on slowly in silence for a few minutes. Nanette sighed deeply, as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “I am so glad you do understand,” she said fervently. “I’ve been worried ever since I heard. The welfare lady put it up to me to choose. She said there were these two offers of adoption and I was to wait twenty-four hours and think it over carefully and then decide for myself.”

Gail wanted to ask, “Was it hard to make up your mind?” but she thought that might embarrass Nanette, so she said nothing.

"But I knew right away," Nanette went on, "for the reasons I've told you. It was awfully decent of her to let me choose, but of course she doesn't know Mrs. Mouse the way I do, so she couldn't understand how much we belong to each other."

She paused a moment, looking happily out over the rough sea. "And, oh, Gail, I'm so happy! And now you and I can go on being more friends than ever, you coming up to the Point every summer and me living here—always! And we can fix up the Knob more and more and maybe even live in it sometime! Mrs. Mouse knows all about the Knob and me, and she loves it too. We'll have such fun!"

They came suddenly within sight of Cobblers' Knob. Even from the distance it looked somehow odd and unnatural. Without a word they broke into a run. Before they reached it they were brought to a stop, for the sea water was washing over the road beside it and the yard and the house itself were surrounded by water.

"The tide!" cried Gail. "Everybody says it's running terribly high!"

Nanette did not answer. She was gazing with white face and frightened eyes at the house.

"Look!" she cried finally. "It's sagging in the middle!"

Even as she spoke, a great white-crested comber came raging in, towered high, and broke with a crash behind the Knob, sending a rush of falling sea all over it. The

water at their feet spread so rapidly that they had to run back to keep out of it. Then they heard a rending, cracking sound and a kind of moan as if the house itself were crying out, and the whole thing broke before their eyes and fell into the ocean. Shingles and timber and some of Nanette's cherished furniture were borne out on the receding wave; the walls seemed to crumble as they fell. Only the chimney still stood, gaunt and defiant among the shambles that had been Cobblers' Knob.

Nanette caught her breath in a great sob and buried her face in her hands. Gail held her trembling body close, but did not speak. What could she say in the face of this new disaster? But in a few moments Nanette raised her head, dashing away the tears as if she were ashamed of them.

"It's—it's so terrible to see it go!" she said, "old Cobblers' Knob, and I love it so much! But—but Gail, it doesn't matter now, really. I've got a mother and a home, my home where I belong. And, Oh Gail, it isn't even *born*ing that makes one belong; it's being loved and wanted and needed!"